

# APPROACHES TO THE PROBLEM OF AKRASIA : FROM MORAL WEAKNESS TO IRRATIONALITY

*A Thesis Submitted  
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of*

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

*by*

**BIBHU PRASAN PATRA**

*to the*

**DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES  
INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, KANPUR**

**OCTOBER, 1989**

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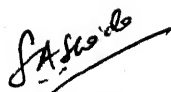


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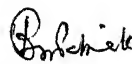
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I will always remain profoundly indebted to Professor S.A. Shaida, my thesis supervisor, who not only took great pains to supervise my work, but also gave me moral and emotional support at every stage. He will always remain a source of inspiration for me.

I also wish to record my deep sense of gratitude to Professor Rajendra Prasad whose course in moral philosophy aroused my interest in the subject and inspired me to work on Akrasia, and who guided my research in its crucial, initial stages.

To Dr. Bijoy H. Boruah and Dr. T.K. Ahmad Nizar, I owe very special thanks. In spite of their busy schedules, they both took personal interest in my work, carefully went through the drafts and gave me helpful suggestions. Thanks are also due to Professor B.N. Patnaik, whose well meaning advice and encouragement stood me in good stead.

I am very grateful to my teachers Professor R.S. Misra, Professor Mohini Mullick and Professor S.N. Mahajan. The training that I received from them during my course work has sharpened my thinking on philosophical issues. Professor Mahajan is no more. I will for ever cherish his kindness and affection for me. I wish to record my sincerest debt of gratitude to my teacher at NEHU, Shillong, Professor N. Malla, who has helped me in numerous ways during my research.

I owe a special debt to my sincerest friend D.C. Srivastava for going through the typescript.

I also wish to express my thanks to all my friends, in particular to Dr. J.N. Mishra, Mrs. V. Raghunathan, Mrs. Achala Raina, Prema, Sanjay, Kailash, Narendra and Kanaujia, who have helped and encouraged me in various ways during my stay at IIT, Kanpur.

I do not know how to express my feelings for the members of my family, without whose support and cooperation I would never have been able to complete my research. I am profoundly grateful to each of them. I am deeply thankful to Dr. Binayak Rath who never let me feel that I was away from home all these years.

I also wish to thank Mr. R.K. Nigam for neatly typing out the dissertation and Mr. Brijlal for his help in taking the printouts.

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October, 1989

## SYNOPSIS

### APPROACHES TO THE PROBLEM OF AKRASIA: FROM MORAL WEAKNESS TO IRRATIONALITY

A Thesis submitted by Bibhu Prasan Patra in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy to the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur.

#### Introduction:

The problem of weakness of the will, or what the Greeks called akrasia, is one of the living issues within the domain of moral philosophy as well as that of philosophy of action. Akrasia occurs when an agent acts against his better judgement. Though such acts are exemplified in our day-to-day life, philosophers have delved into the conceptual difficulties in admitting the possibility of akrasia. For traditional Greek thinkers akrasia is predominately a moral issue. With their conception of ethics as a practical science and with their discussion on moral issues couched in practical discourse, they discussed the problem of akrasia in a theoretical context with reference to the nature of knowledge and virtue. After remaining more or less dormant for a long time, this problem has been revived by Hare, Davidson and other contemporary philosophers. The present work is an attempt to study the various solutions to the problem of akrasia offered by philosophers, from ancient Greek to contemporary ones, and develop a view that supports the commonsensical intuitions about akrasia.

## Chapter II: The Socratic Paradox

The problem of akrasia finds its earliest philosophical expression albeit in a negative manner, in the reflections of Socrates. Socrates denies the possibility of akrasia on the basis of his doctrine that "virtue is knowledge". We discuss this doctrine as it is presented in Protagoras and Meno, where it supports the conclusion that no one does wrong voluntarily. This as per commonsense appears paradoxical since we do, at least pre-reflectively, believe that some men sometimes do what is wrong with the full knowledge that it is wrong. Philosophers have followed commonsense in characterising this situation as paradoxical and calling it the Socratic Paradox since it is the consequence of the famous Socratic doctrine. But in the Republic, where the empirical aspect of human nature is discussed, Plato recognizes the presence of a motivational conflict in the individual. We try to show that Plato's psychology allows the possibility of akrasia.

## Chapter III: The Aristotelian Resolution

Aristotle claims that akrasia is often evident in our day to day life. He criticises Socrates for not taking into account this common fact of our life. Experience shows that people sometimes act against what they know or believe to be right, or do what they know or believe to be wrong. Though he agrees with Socrates and Plato that akrasia involves some kind of ignorance, he does not explain away the problem by saying that the sole cause of akrasia is ignorance. Rather he provides a detailed

analysis of the nature of ignorance, while maintaining that the akrates knows that his act is wrong. The four ways in which the akrates can be said to act with knowledge are: (i) when the knowledge is in the potential form but not used; (ii) when there is ignorance of the minor premise of the relevant practical syllogism; (iii) when the knowledge is present in an attenuated way due to drunken state etc. and (iv) when sensual desire prevents knowledge from being operative. We contend that the fourth solution of Aristotle leaves room for an explanation of akrasia in terms of motivational conflict.

#### Chapter IV: Backsliding: The Prescriptivist View

Hare's formulation of the problem directly follows from his prescriptivist account of value judgement. According to him, the problem is: How can a man accept some moral judgement and yet act contrary to it, despite recognizing that moral judgements, in their central use, have their action-guiding role? Hare argues that when an agent accepts the value judgement that he ought to do X, then he sets out to do X. But in the case of akrasia an agent does not do what he thinks he ought to do. Hare says that 'ought' with no 'can' becomes a pseudo-ought, since for him 'ought' implies 'can'. But in this case the 'ought' is accompanied by a 'cannot'. Thus the 'ought' here is a vacuous 'ought'. According to him a person does not sincerely assent to a value judgement unless he acts on it (of course, given the opportunity and possibility). In this chapter we discuss Hare's

forceful and open contention that akrasia is logically impossible. We examine Hare's 'psychological impossibility' thesis and argue that if we treat psychological impossibility on par with physical impossibility, as Hare does, then that thesis is counter-intuitive.

## Chapter V: Failure of Reason: The Davidsonian Account

Davidson proposes to dissociate the problem from the discourse of morality. Taking cue from some recent discussions, he characterizes incontinent action (akratic action) as follows:

- D. In doing x an agent acts incontinently if and only if:
- (a) the agent does x intentionally; (b) the agent believes there is an alternative action y open to him; and (c) the agent judges that, all things considered it would be better to do y than to do x. ("How is weakness of will possible?" In Essays on Actions and Events, p. 22)

He then formulates the following three principles which he treats as self-evident.

- P1. If an agent wants to do x more than he wants to do y and he believes himself free to do either x or y then he will intentionally do x if he does either x or y intentionally;
- P2. If an agent judges that it would be better to do x than to do y, then he wants to do x more than he wants to do y;
- P3. There are incontinent actions.

Davidson maintains that these three principles are not inconsistent. According to him the agent makes an irrational



move but he does not thereby contradict himself. In this chapter we have examined the shift of the problem from morality to irrationality. For Davidson the problem of akrasia is that of reason and action.

David Pears also holds a similar view that akrasia is an instance of irrational action. He characterizes this irrationality as 'thought-misfit irrationality'. In his view one's thought ought to govern one's action; akrasia occurs when thought does not control action. In his view akratic action is irrational because the agent's preparatory thought does not harmonize with his action. He considers this preparatory thought to be an equipment, because the agent sets out for the action by being equipped with certain thoughts. We judge an action to be akratic or not with reference to this equipment./

✓In the concluding chapter we propose that (i) the conceptual problem of akrasia arises because of a strong assumption of rationality; (ii) the shift of focus from morality to irrationality is methodologically convenient; (iii) the question about the psychological state of the akrates has been a concern of all philosophers we have discussed in the thesis; (iv) each of these philosophers in one way or the other has appealed to the nature of human mind; (v) a proper solution to the problem of akrasia lies in a theory of motivational strength.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The problem of the weakness of the will, or what the ancient Greeks called akrasia, has received varying philosophical treatment ever since the days of Socrates till present day analytic philosophy. What made philosophers from Socrates to Davidson and Pears interested in the phenomenon of akrasia, is the relevance of its admission or rejection not only to certain moral questions but also to the wide spectrum of issues revolving around the relation between thought/belief and action. In other words, it has been seen to be significant both for ethics and philosophy of action. In both the cases, akrasia is found to have raised various issues and problems which involve knowledge, understanding, rationality, belief, choice, deliberation, decision, motivation, desire and their various correlates. In the context of ethics it has specifically raised the issue whether virtue/vice or good/evil is knowable and is accepted by us on the strength of reason. If the answer to this question is in the affirmative, then how does such knowledge influence action? Does right knowledge or understanding or belief always guarantee right action? The problem arises when such a theory is seen to be contradicted by our observation of human practice. Such a conflict may, however, be suggested to be apparent by offering various explanations which may range from denying the status of knowledge to the 'supposed knowledge' one claims to have, to showing that it is entirely a problem of irrationality.

The problem stems from the root assumption that if an agent considers a particular course of action to be better than another, then he will naturally do that action. This is perceived as a fundamentally reasonable correlation between judgement or reason and action. But it is precisely the breakdown of this prima facie relation between judgement/reason and action that characterises the problematic feature of an akratic action. And it hardly needs saying that human beings are often found to act in just this way. Therefore it seems philosophically incumbent to examine the paradox of a human action which is contrary to the agent's best judgement. Thus, philosophers, both traditional and contemporary, have undertaken various approaches highlighting, in their respective frameworks, epistemic, logical and psychological aspects involved in the problem of akrasia. Socrates has advocated the view that, since no agent knowingly does anything wrong, the akratic act cannot but be an outcome of ignorance. The point of epistemic failure of the akratic agent is made evident through a deeper analysis by Aristotle. He maintains that akrasia is not just a case of plain ignorance but is more complex in nature, in that the nature of ignorance involved here is of a quite different kind. Keeping in view the logic of moral language that 'ought' entails 'can', Hare gives a logical twist to the problem when he contends that if an agent holds a value-judgement that he ought to do X, then, necessarily, he does X. Given this constraint, akrasia is

logically impossible. Davidson shifts the nature of the problem by transplanting it into the soil of rationality. In his view the akratic act is irrational because in doing it the agent violates the principle of continence, which is deemed to be a principle of rational action.

The Socratic dictum 'virtue is knowledge' makes the akratic action quite baffling because, given this dictum, there can be no akratic action. Socrates resolves this baffling situation by saying that the knowledge claimed to be present in the akrates is only supposed to be knowledge; it in fact is mere ignorance. The so-called akratic action is done unknowingly. This on the one hand salvages the Socratic position that no one knowingly does bad/evil, and on the other explains away the problem of akrasia. Besides, in the Socratic treatment of akrasia it is also suggested that desire for pleasure often overpowers the agent's reason or knowledge. Thus it is epistemic failure or psychological weakness which accounts for the akratic action.

Aristotle gives a more definite and detailed turn to this problem. Unlike Socrates, he recognizes akrasia to be a genuine problem and admits that the akrates has knowledge of what he does. But this knowledge, adds Aristotle, is either in potential form, or overshadowed by the akrates' ignorance of the minor premiss of the relevant practical syllogism, or affected by an abnormal state such as drunkenness. Besides, this knowledge may also be rendered inoperative by some sensual desire gripping the

agent.

In contemporary philosophical thought Hare's position echoes the Socratic approach to the problem. Hare's prescriptivist analysis of ethical judgements makes it true by definition that whoever rightly understands and assents to a moral judgement necessarily acts in accordance with that judgement. That is to say, there is a logical oddity about someone's saying that something is good and yet not doing it. Although this position is logically sound within the framework of prescriptivist moral language, it does not seem to follow that the problem is thereby made to disappear. Given this framework, it is logically necessary that one ought to act in conformity with the principle he assents to; but it does not guarantee that the agent would actually act as the principle prescribes. In other words, the transition from assenting to the principle to acting according to it is not automatic, but requires the mediation of a psychological state or disposition such as will or determination or motivation to act. What may account for the failure to do what the agent sincerely believes he ought to do could be lack of attention, a slip, or, what an existentialist like Sartre would say, bad faith (mauvaise foi).

It is in Davidson that the umbilical chord which attaches akrasia to morality is severed and akrasia is thereby seen purely as a problem of relating action to reason. Davidson tries to resolve the Socratic and Hare's paradox by distinguishing a fully reasoned and objectively valid conditional value judgement which

is based on a comprehensive evaluation of all relevant and significant evidence involved (that is, his 'all-things-considered' judgement) from the unconditional value judgement. And an unconditional value judgement is what is essential to the occurrence of an intentional action. He introduces the principle of continence which enjoins upon the agent the obligation to do what is best or better after taking into account all relevant considerations. But the akratic agent acts in violation of this principle as he actually acts contrary to his all-things-considered judgement. Davidson admits that though the akrates has reason for doing what he does, he does not have a reason for acting against the more sober and reasonable conditional value judgement 'that he ought to act on what he holds to be best, everything considered'. Pears is essentially in agreement with Davidson's view that an akratic action is a case of irrationality, though he specifically sees its genesis in a mismatch between thought and action.

However, the question still remains whether a rational or unconditional value judgement can ensure proper volition or motivation necessary for action. What constitutes the crux of the problem is to decide where the weakness of the intentional akratic act lies. In a way it is obvious that the weakness lies in the agent's not carrying out the action which is singularly implied by the rational belief or judgement he holds. Yet this is precisely what calls for an explanation, that is to say how it

is that the agent fails to comply with that judgement. The question arises because it is believed that it is physically and psychologically possible for the agent to do what he actually fails to do. Thus, it may appear that when the agent intentionally and freely does something contrary to his knowledge of good or right, or against his rational judgement, what he does is not a case of rational willing but a case of degenerate will, which is taken for a ride by some unruly impulses and desires, or is the result of lack of self-control.

In this thesis our aim is to examine this paradoxical issue by way of a historical study of the various solutions advanced by thinkers ranging from the ancient Greeks to the contemporary thinkers of analytic philosophy. Our focal attention in this study will however be to accommodate any attempted solution to the commonsensical intuitions regarding akratic action. And in this endeavour we shall concentrate on demonstrating how such an action needs to be fully accounted for by reference to some relevant psychological state of the agent. As such, our investigation tends towards emphasising the psychological factor in throwing light upon our understanding of how akrasia is possible.

## CHAPTER II

### THE SOCRATIC PARADOX.

The famous Socratic doctrine 'virtue is knowledge' (and 'vice is ignorance') based on the Socratic-Platonic conception of virtue and knowledge and their relationship, leads to the conclusion that no one does wrong voluntarily. This as per commonsense looks paradoxical since most of us believe, at least pre-reflectively, that some men on certain occasions do what is wrong with the full knowledge that what they are doing is wrong. Philosophers have followed commonsense in characterising this situation as paradoxical, and in calling it the Socratic paradox. Indeed, this paradox is a consequence of the famous Socratic doctrine, namely virtue is knowledge.

Socrates equates knowledge with virtue (i.e. if one has knowledge he is virtuous and if he is virtuous he has knowledge) and maintains that ignorance is the cause of akrasia. Aristotle affirms (Nicomachean Ethics, 1145b, 25 - 30) that for Socrates "there is no such thing as incontinence"; no one for him "acts against what he judges best - people act so by reason of ignorance". But all this is paradoxical as, continues Aristotle, it "plainly contradicts observed facts". Although common experience seems to unambiguously exemplify that sometimes we know what is right yet we do not do it, or know what is wrong and still do it. Hence the Socratic conclusion does not seem to be compatible with the facts of common moral life.



There are certain crucial concepts that enter into the controversy just mentioned about the relationship between knowledge and virtue. In the following we shall discuss the nature of knowledge, virtue and the related question, what kind of knowledge virtue is. We shall also see whether the Platonic Socrates is successful in solving the problem of akrasia (i.e. the denial of akrasia in some of Plato's dialogues) by branding it as a product of ignorance.

In the Gorgias Plato draws a basic distinction between knowledge (episteme) and opinion or belief (doxa). Knowledge is said to be true, but belief can be either true or false. In the Meno he seems to have understated the practical value of this duality between knowledge and right opinion or true belief. With the example of the road to Larrisa, he substantiates his argument that knowledge is not the only sine qua non for right actions. Right opinion is also equally useful in guiding actions. Of course one who knows the road to Larrisa will be a good guide to those who follow him on the way to Larrisa. But someone who judges correctly which is the road to Larrisa without ever having been there can also be equally a good guide. To wit Plato:

Therefore true opinion is as good a guide as knowledge for the purpose of acting rightly ..... There was also it seems true opinion. Meno: It seems so. Soc: So right opinion is something no less useful than knowledge. (Meno, 97c)

Inspite of such usefulness of the right opinion, Platonic Socrates is very much sceptical about its usefulness. The reason

behind this scepticism is that, for Socrates, opinion or belief by nature is unstable. Unless it is controlled or governed by reason it can go on changing; once it is grounded in reason, it becomes unshakeable and is converted to knowledge. Knowledge is incorruptible and is always guided, controlled or governed by reason. Since knowledge is stable, it is always dependable. True beliefs or right opinions, on the other hand, are always susceptible to be corrupt and hence are not readily dependable. They can, however, become stable and cease to create problems when they are controlled by reason. Since beliefs are essentially unstable, one cannot depend upon them. So their usefulness is doubted. Knowledge, being free from such unstability, is, on the contrary, always useful. Plato writes:

SOC: True opinions are fine things and do all sorts of good so long as they stay in their place; but they will not stay long. They run away from man's mind, so they are not worth much until you tether them by working out the reason.... Once they are tied down, they become knowledge, and are stable. That is why knowledge is something more valuable than right opinion. What distinguishes one from the other is the tether. (Meno 98a)

Knowledge cannot be dragged about like a slave to passion, pleasure, pain, love and fear. On the contrary, it is noble and is able to govern men. Knowledge is superior because it is not subservient to passion' Socrates discusses this in the Protagoras as follows:

Most people think, in general terms, that it (knowledge) is nothing strong, no leading or ruling element. They don't see it like that. They hold that it is not the knowledge

that a man possesses which governs him, but something else - now passion, now pleasure, now pain, sometimes love, and frequently fear. They just think of knowledge as a slave, pushed around by all the other affections.

And Socrates puts this question to Protagoras:

Is this your view too, or would you rather say that knowledge is a fine thing quite capable of ruling a man, and that if he can distinguish good from evil, nothing will force him to act otherwise than as knowledge dictates, since wisdom is all the reinforcement he needs? .... to speak of wisdom and knowledge as anything but the most powerful elements in human life (352, b-d).

Both Protagoras and Socrates agree on the latter claim that knowledge is a noble thing, quite capable of ruling a man, and that it is the guiding principle by means of which we distinguish good (right) from evil (wrong). Once we know what is good (right), this knowledge becomes sufficient for our acting against what is evil (wrong) (i.e. once someone is knowledgeable enough to distinguish between good and evil, he cannot but be forced to do what is good). Knowledge is superior because of its firmness. It always guides human action in proper direction. People may do wrong while they are guided by right opinion, because right opinion, as we have seen in the Meno, is not stable, and does not stay long, they run away from man's mind. Plato's discussion of knowledge in the Protagoras shows the motivational superiority of knowledge. Plato tries to establish that knowledge is motivationally superior in guiding human action. Thus for Socrates knowledge is the principle of strength. The supremacy or strength of knowledge, as stated in the Meno, is epistemological and as stated in the Protagoras, it is

motivational (Walsh, 1963, p. 31). Knowledge is both epistemologically and motivationally superior. For Socrates, that reason motivates human action is not a mere conceptual truth but a truth pertaining to human nature. While for Hume reason only informs us about the relationship between ideas and does not move us to action, for Plato and Socrates it also moves us to action.

If knowledge is the principle of strength, how is it that weakness of will (akrasia) takes place? How is it possible for a man to act against, or contrary to, what he knows or judges to be better? Socrates says that in case of akrasia, the agent wrongly thinks that he knows which course of action is best for him. But his knowledge is not complete. He knows only apparently what is better. His discussion of knowledge in the Meno shows that in case of akrasia it is not knowledge but right opinion which is overcome or superseded. Because true beliefs or right opinions fail to guide action in all cases. But his discussion of knowledge in the Protagoras shows that akrasia is a kind of ignorance. We will shortly come back to this point, and discuss in detail what kind of ignorance it is.

The Platonic Socrates holds that people may be ignorant about their ignorance and, in practices, tries to make them aware of it. In the Republic, Plato also distinguishes between knowledge, opinion and ignorance. He says that (i) in knowledge we have the knowledge of being (or what is), (ii) in opinion we

do grasp something because it is impossible to hold an opinion about nothing and, (iii) ignorance is a state of not-being (what is not) where we do not know anything (Republic 478, a-c).

Though Plato distinguishes ignorance from opinion, his theory that akrasia is a case of ignorance (in the Protagoras) and that it is not a case of knowledge but of superseded opinion, do not seem to be two rival theories. Rather, they seem to be supported by each other. We shall discuss in detail the denial of akrasia in some of Plato's Dialogues and thereby show how these two views support each other.

Before that let us now explicate, what is virtue according to Platonic Socrates, since this will be relevant for pursuing our discussion of the denial of akrasia by Socrates. Our purpose, however, is not to study Plato's theory of virtue in detail. We are only interested in that aspect of virtue which is linked with the problem of akrasia.

In the Meno Socrates clearly asserts that "virtue is good". The discussion on virtue starts from Meno's claim that virtue is 'desiring fine things and being able to, acquire them' (77b). Socrates immediately says that desiring fine things means desiring good things and Meno admits it. In 78B it is stated that "virtue consists in a wish for good things plus the power to acquire them". So in 77b, 78b Meno defines virtue as desiring fine (good) things and being able to acquire them. But Socrates

argues that desire for what is good will not be a criterion for distinguishing a good man from a bad one. Because everybody desires what is good and no one desires the evil. Again for Meno, being virtuous implies having the ability to acquire good things. But Socrates shows that the ability to acquire good things cannot by itself bring virtue. Meno however denies that everyone desires good things. In his opinion there are people (1) those who desire evils believing them to be good, and (2) those who recognise evil as evil and yet desire them, in the sense of possessing them. The second claim splits into two parts:

- (a) Desiring evils in the belief that they bring advantage to their possessor;
- (b) Desiring evils in the belief that they harm their possessor.

Socrates has no objection to (1) but he rejects not only (2) but also (2) together with (a) or (b).

Nakhnikian (1973, p. 3) points out that for Socrates the first part of the second view is conceptually false, and the second part of it is psychologically false. As he says:

... it is conceptually impossible for a man to know that a thing is evil and at the same time to believe that evil do good to those who possess them...

And he adds:

... it is psychologically impossible for a man to know that a thing will harm those who possess it yet to desire that thing for himself.

Socrates holds that if any one desires evil (bad) things, believing that they will do good to him, then he does so because he does not know that they are evil (bad) things. Only out of ignorance does one mistake evil (bad) things to be good. Meno also agrees with Socrates on this point, in Meno 77d, Socrates says:

Is not it clear then that this class, who do not recognise evils for what they are, do not desire evil but what they think is good, though in fact it is evil; those who through ignorance mistake bad things for good obviously desire the good?

For Socrates, those people who desire evil (bad) things, think (wrongly believe) them to be good, though these things are in fact evil (bad). It seems as if Socrates is contradicting himself by holding both these views, i.e. (i) People do not desire bad things, (ii) in fact these things are evil (bad) (or what they thought to be good).

Santas (1979, pp. 187 - 188) observes that Socrates is not committing any contradiction by asserting the above mentioned views. He points out the fact that 'statements of desire are cases of indirect discourse'. When someone desires something, the ground of his desire is his conception of what the object is, 'not (necessarily) what the object in fact is'. As Frege has also pointed out the grounds of the desires (feelings) are the conviction or belief of the agent who desires it (or whose feelings they are). Santas distinguishes between intended object

of desire and actual object of desire. He argues that the description of intended object of desire may or may not be the same as the description of the actual object of desire. He says that there is no contradiction in saying that the intended object of some one's desire is something and the actual object of desire is something else. We may think that to say that X is the intended object of A's desire is to imply that X must exist. But Santas points out that it is a complete mistake to hold such view. His discussion of the intended object runs as follows.

... suppose, e.g. (1) Jones wants a loaf of wheat bread (in the sense that 'loaf of wheat bread' is the description of the intended object of his desire). What is the intended object of Jones's desire? It is not of course the description 'loaf of wheat bread' - that would be absurd. Now why can't we give the obvious answer: the intended object of his desire is a loaf of wheat bread? It is sometimes held that this obvious answer is mistaken on the ground that it is possible for (1) to be true even though it is also true that (2) there are in fact any loaves of wheat bread. This objection is very puzzling: I can understand it on the supposition that the objector assumes that (3) if someone desire something, then there is something which is desired. But this seems to me a complete mistake.

I do not know of what logical form (1) is, but the fact that both (1) and (2) can be true at once shows conclusively, it seems to me that (1) is not the form of ( $\exists x$ ) (x is a loaf of bread. Jones desires x). And if (3) says anything at all, it says that (1) has this form. The fact that (1) and (2) both be true, far from being an objection to the obvious answer, shows that the above objection is mistaken. I do not see, therefore, that in order to say correctly 'The intended object of Jones's desire is such and such,' the such and such must exist. (Santas, 1979, pp. 316 - 317, notes 22).

The preceding discussion shows that one can intend to desire something when actually there is no such thing. There is nothing



logically odd about it. They both can go together. It is not necessary that when we desire something, that thing has to exist. Now look at Socrates' assertion that those people who desire bad things in the mistaken belief that they are good things, do not desire bad things, but rather desire good things. What he meant by it according to Santas, is that the intended object of their desire is not something bad; rather it is something good.

For Socrates there is no such person who knows evil (bad) things to be evil, and also knows that evil always harms those who possess them, but still desires them. So people really desire only good things, and those who seem to desire evil (bad) things, which in fact are evil or bad, desire them under the impression that they are good, or will do good.

In Meno 87d, both Socrates and Meno firmly assert that virtue is something good. It is virtue which is always beneficial for us. Socrates appears to employ a deductive argument to this effect in 87e. It is like this:

All good things are advantageous  
virtue is something good.

Therefore, virtue is something advantageous.

Virtue is always good and beneficial (advantageous) but without the knowledge of the good it sometimes harms us. The determining factor of virtue being harmful or advantageous is its right or wrong use. It is right use which makes it advantageous, and the

absence of it makes it harmful. A virtuous action is performed with some reason, i.e. with rational understanding. A virtuous action done with reason always profits the agent, and when it is done without reason it always harms him. Courage<sup>1</sup>, shown in face of risk or danger, or fear with reason, is virtue and beneficial to the agent, but when it is used thoughtlessly, it is just a sort of misplaced confidence and may do harm to the agent. In Meno88b Socrates says:

SOC : Don't you think they may be harmful as well as advantageous? Courage for instance, if it is something thoughtless, just a sort of confidence. Isn't it true that to be confident without reason does a man harm, whereas a reasoned confidence profits him? Meno: yes.

So Socrates claims that virtue in order to be advantageous or beneficial to the agent should always involve knowledge. It is the presence or absence of knowledge which makes virtue advantageous or harmful. We admit that virtue is advantageous, so it amounts to saying that "virtue is knowledge".

Let us now explicate the Socratic doctrine that "virtue is knowledge" and see how the relationship of virtue and knowledge rules out cases of incontinence (akrasia).

On the traditional interpretations of "virtue is knowledge", (i.e. if one has knowledge he is virtuous, and if he is virtuous he has knowledge) to know what virtue is, is to be virtuous. Knowledge, understood in this sense, is equivalent to the knowledge of virtue. So our biconditionals become: if one has knowledge of virtue, he is virtuous and if he is virtuous he has

knowledge of virtue. Thus knowledge (of virtue) becomes both necessary and sufficient conditions for being virtuous.

We have seen in the Protagoras that "knowledge is a fine thing quite capable of ruling a man", and "it is the most powerful element in human life". This description of knowledge shows that knowledge is essential for virtue. And as noticed earlier, virtue is advantageous because it entails knowledge.

The thesis that knowing what virtue is, is to be virtuous, is based on the Socratic characterization of virtue as a professional skill (Apology, 22b). The knowledge here (which is virtue), is not only an abstract, or theoretical grasp of knowledge, but also has the power or practical ability to manifest in virtuous behaviour. According to Socrates in the professional skills like, medicine, music, warfare and navigation, it is knowledge, which leads them to success. A good doctor has the knowledge of healing the sick, a good carpenter has the knowledge (skill) of making the appropriate artefacts.

Just as in case of the professional skills (craft), in the moral behaviour also, knowledge capacitates the agent to perform virtuous action. The Socratic notion of virtue as craft, suggests that if some one knows what virtue is, then he will pursue what is virtuous. In the Gorgias (460), Plato says: "he who has learnt what is just, is a just man". He further claims that a just man always does just action. The argument he puts

forward in support of this is that people desire what is good and once they know that justice will do good to them, they will always pursue justice. Thus, the knowledge of what is virtue is an ability to exhibit virtuous behaviour, i.e. knowing what is virtue is to be virtuous.

But, if moral knowledge is just like a skill, i.e. one who has knowledge of virtue becomes virtuous<sup>2</sup>, then the Socratic denial of akrasia is based on his practical bias. Walsh, (1963, p. 13) points out:

If we lean too heavily on the "Practical" aspect of Socratic wisdom, the denial of akrasia in the name of that wisdom can amount to a simple tautology hardly worthy of a master dialectician. That is if moral knowledge just is skill, then the suggestion that a person can know and not act appropriately is ridiculous.

So the view of Socrates, i.e. to know what is virtue is to perform virtuous action, is not compatible with our common facts of moral life. We sometimes knowingly do certain actions which we ought not to do.

The cornerstone of Socrates' discussion of virtue is that all virtuous actions are governed by reason and they contribute to the happiness of their possessor. Socrates' claim is that what is virtue (good) always benefits the agent and what is evil always harms the agent. He asserts that akrasia is simply not possible because reason is always an infallible guide to human action. We have seen that people desire and undertake that course of action which is beneficial for them. The cardinal

point of Plato's (Socrates') argument is that an agent does an action with good reason (or knowledge) only if it benefits him and contributes to his happiness. One might, however, argue here that acting with reason excludes desire or passion from human action. But Socrates' answer to this is that people always desire good things. His assertion of this universal desire (Santas calls this doctrine the 'egoistic theory of motivation') suggests that desire is not excluded from doing virtuous action. Now let us come back to our discussion of the denial of *akrasia* in some of Plato's dialogues.

Socrates seems to ignore the common facts of moral life by holding the view that whoever has the knowledge of what is good or virtue (and what is bad or evil), will never do what is wrong. This is so because the nature of moral knowledge is such that it always guides action in proper direction (i.e. virtuous action is always done with reason and knowledge). For Socrates it follows as a matter of logic that if a man does wrong, then he does not know what is right. Right action invariably follows from the conception of moral knowledge. So it becomes logically true for Socrates that "no one does wrong willingly". (cf. Bambrough, 1960, p. 209)

In the Protagoras Socrates strongly objects to the possibility that sometimes we know what is good, but when appropriate time comes, we do not do that though we are able to do that. Both Socrates and Protagoras agree that knowledge is

noble and able to govern men. Socrates raises the issue again and says:

'But I expect you know that most men don't believe us. They maintain that there are many who recognise the best but are unwilling to act on it. It may be open to them, but they do otherwise. Whenever I ask what can be the reason for this, they answer that those who act in this way are overcome by pleasure or pain or some other of the things I mentioned just now'. (Protagoras, 352d, e)

The point Socrates makes here is that when men know or recognise that it is best to do a certain act and yet are not willing to do it, it is not that they fail to be virtuous; rather their virtue is superseded, overclouded, subdued by pleasure, or pain, or love, or anger, or fear.

Socrates examines the problem in the Protagoras from the stand point of hedonism. He identifies good with pleasure (i.e. good means pleasure and pleasure means good). The explanation of his hedonist doctrine starts from the statement that something pleasant is painful and something painful is pleasant. He says, when we say that something pleasant is painful (evil), we suggest that it will result in pain and deprive us of future pleasure. (Protagoras, 354) Take, for example, the case of a man who drinks a lot in a party and gets pleasure out of it. Certainly he gets the pleasure at that moment, but later on it results in pains when he suffers from a bad hangover, which hampers his work, etc. The case of something painful being pleasant, involves such things as "physical training, military campaigns, doctors' treatment involving cautery or the knife or drug or

starvation diet". (Protagoras, 354) These things, though they are painful at that moment, result in future pleasures like, "health, bodily well being, the safety of one's country, domination over other's wealth etc." (Protagoras, 354b) Socrates holds that men always discard those actions which give immediate lesser pleasure and remote greater pain, and pursue those actions which give immediate lesser pain and a remote greater pleasure. So getting maximum pleasure is always the end of their action and people always desire things which contribute to their pleasure.

Now let us consider how Socrates explains the phenomenon of "being overcome by pleasure". According to Socrates, when people say that they are "being overcome by pleasure", they have in mind the desires for food, drink, sex etc. He points out that such desires drive them away from their belief about good. Both Socrates and Protagoras agree that people always pursue pleasure as it is the good and avoid pain as it is the evil. Sometimes people say that what is pleasant is also bad, when it results in pain that 'out weigh' the pleasure. (Protagoras, 354 c, e) The hedonistic doctrine here suggests that people always perform that action which contributes to their pleasure. So pleasure is the ultimate goal of their action. This statement clearly shows the admission of both psychological and ethical hedonism.

Socrates says that if one holds that people always pursue pleasure and avoid pain, and that pleasure is good and pain is

evil, then it is absurd for him to say that sometimes they do evil, even by knowing them to be evil, when they might have avoided it.

This position makes your argument ridiculous. You say that a man often recognizes evil actions as evil, yet commits them, under no compulsion, because he is led on and distracted by pleasure; and on the other hand that, recognizing the good, he refrains from following it because he is overcome by the pleasures of the moment. (Protagoras, 355 a, b emphasis added)

We have seen in 352 d, e that Socrates also asserts that people act contrary to their knowledge because they are overcome by pleasure. So in the Protagoras, (352 d, e, 355 a, b) he asserts that being overcome by pleasure is the reason for weakness.

While debating with Protagoras Socrates says that the substitution of good for pleasure yields a ridiculous position. Any tendency to exchange good for pleasure on the one hand, and evil for pain on the other, would result in asserting that "being overcome by good". And it would then amount to saying that people do evil even though they recognize it as evil, because they are overcome by good. And surely such a conclusion is absurd, for it hardly makes any sense to say that one is overcome by good to do evil. In order to prevent this, Socrates recommends that we do not treat terms like pleasant, painful, good and evil together, but concentrate only on two terms - good and evil - and regard pleasure and pain as associates of good and evil when looked at from a different stage or level.

The stage in which the concepts 'pleasure' and 'pain' have



relevance is where the quantity of pleasure and pain matters. Adopting a conception of quantity, he says that "overcome" means "choosing greater evils (pain) in exchange of smaller good (pleasure)." (Protagoras, 355 e) Socrates also appears to anticipate Bentham in his suggestion concerning the measurement of pleasure and pain. He holds that the quantity of pleasure and pain can be calculated by their remoteness or proximity (i.e. comparing between the present and the future pleasure or pain.)

So, like an expert in weighing, put the pleasures together and pains together, set both the near and distant in the balance, and say which is the greater quantity. In weighing pleasure against pleasure, one must always choose the greater and the more; in weighing pains against pains the smaller and the less: whereas in weighing pleasures against pains, if the pleasure exceeds the pains, whether the distant, the near or vice versa, one must take the course which brings those pleasures; but if the pain outweighs the pleasures, avoid it. Is this not so, good people?" I should say, and I am sure they could not deny it (Protagoras, 356 b, c).

What Socrates asserts in the above discussion is that the person who has this ability of calculation, exercises "correctness of choice" while performing moral action.

When people choose smaller pleasure instead of greater, they fail to distinguish between good and evil (bad). In other words, the ability to judge which course of action gives how much pleasure is absent in the agent. Thus Socrates holds that "being overcome by pleasure" is a case of lack of knowledge. In our discussion of knowledge, we have said that "it is the principle of strength", and he who has knowledge, always controls his actions

by it. He has a mastery over pleasure, pain, love, fear and so on. When people say that they are "being overcome by pleasure", (i.e. they mean that their action is governed by pleasure) they give this as a reason for wrong doing. They miscalculate their choice of pleasure and pain, they fail to distinguish between what is good and what is bad. The miscalculation is the result of their lack of knowledge. Thus according to Socrates to act without knowledge is to act in ignorance. He argues that:

To remind you of your question, it arose because we two agreed that there was nothing more powerful than knowledge, but that wherever it is found it always has the mastery over pleasure and everything else. You on the other hand, who maintain that pleasure often masters even the man who knows, asked us to say what this experience really is, if it is not being mastered by pleasure. If we had answered you straight off that it is ignorance, you would have laughed at us, but if you laugh at us now, you will be laughing at yourselves as well; for you have agreed that when people make a wrong choice of pleasures and pains - that is good and evil - the cause of their mistake is lack of knowledge. We can go further, and call it, as you have already agreed, a science of measurement; and you know yourselves that a wrong action which is done without knowledge is done in ignorance. So that is what 'being mastered by pleasure' really is - ignorance, and most serious ignorance... (Protagoras 357 c-e).

Thus Plato maintains that akrasia is ignorance - ignorance of measurement of pleasure and pain or good and evil. The akratic agent lacks the ability of measurement. So in case of akrasia the agent judges the immediate lesser good to be greater and pursues it. That is why Socrates concludes that "being overcome by pleasure" is simply a case of ignorance. Watson (1977, p. 329) puts it succinctly:

... Socrates insisted that what is called weakness of will (akrasia) is really a species of ignorance. The weak agent suffers from a kind of evaluation illusion, very like an optical illusion - the nearer, more immediate good looks the greater. The so called weak agent lacks the art of measurement, the art of correctly weighing nearer and farther goods, and to have this art is to have knowledge of good and evil.

Socrates argues that wrong doing is sufficient reason for asserting that the agent does not know what is right, i.e. he is ignorant of it. So he says wrong action which is done without knowledge is done out of ignorance. Hence, Socrates maintains that akrasia is ignorance.

He further argues that human nature is such that men always desire pleasure and avoid pain. By nature people are such that they desire good things.

Then it must follow that no one willingly goes to meet evil or what he thinks to be evil. To make for what one believes to be evil, instead of making for good, is not, it seems, in human nature; and when faced with the choice of two evils no one will choose the greater when he might choose the less (Protagoras, 358 d).

We have seen that virtuous actions are governed by reason (or knowledge). If anybody chooses the greater evil, then he lacks the proper knowledge of choosing between the two evils (i.e. greater and lesser). So, the Socratic denial of the fact that "there are many who recognize the best (have the knowledge of the best) but are unwilling to act on it" is based on this conception of human nature. Vlastos points out that this is based on a purely deductive proof deprived of any support from observation:

He writes:

The words which are italicized [in the passage from Protagoras quoted above] show quite well what kind of statement Socrates is making here: the kind which we would call an empirical one. K, like its humbler cousin, c, purports to tell us a fact of human nature - the kind of matter of fact that can only be found out by observation. Where then is the reference to such observation? Nowhere in the whole of this elaborate argument. In the case of C Socrates at least went through the notions of induction; here not even this: he is quite content here with a purely deductive proof of it. Now anyone who could excogitate by pure deduction a fact of human nature would have to be a wizard. And Socrates is only human, we would not be risking much if we were to predict that his attempt will fail.<sup>3</sup>

So Socrates' denial of the possibility of the agent's knowing what is best and his unwillingness to perform it is not convincing, because Socrates has not taken into account any observed facts of ordinary life to support his position. It is based on a purely deductive argument. But it is very difficult to establish the 'denial' by a purely deductive argument, without any observational support. Our day to day common experience shows that akrasia is an observed fact of human life. Perhaps empirical findings would reveal this common fact.

In the Republic the empirical aspect of human nature is discussed in detail. Plato recognises the motivational conflict present in an individual. Let us now see how the whole problem looks like when the observed facts are taken into account. And this is exactly what Plato does in his later dialogue, Republic.  
<sup>4</sup>  
 He gives a description of human psychology, which explains the fact that human beings sometimes act against what they consider

to be best. Plato divides the soul into three parts: reason, spirit and appetite. There are three different types of desire corresponding to the three parts of the soul. He describes their individual functions as follows:

Each of the three elements has its own particular pleasures, and similarly its own desires and its own governing principles ... 'one element in a man gives him understanding, another spirit and enterprize, while the third shows itself in too many forms for us to be able to describe it in a single word. We accordingly called it after its most salient characteristics, "desire", because of the violence of the desires for food and drink and sex and the like, or "acquisitiveness", because wealth is the means of satisfying desires of this kind' (Republic 580 d, e).

The different parts of the soul have their respective desires. The rational part has the desire for knowledge, the spirititive part has the desire for rule, conquest and fame, the appetitive part has the instinctive craving for food, drink and sex. So they motivate human action also in different manner. The rational part motivates to act in deliberate choice, the spirititive part motivates to act on generous impulse, and the appetitive part motivates to act on animal appetite.

The spirititive part is faithful to reason and obeys the commands of reason. But the appetitive part does not pay heed to the commands of reason. It disobeys the order of reason. It is difficult for reason to control it. In the Phaedrus, Plato describes the rational part as a charioteer, and the other two parts as two horses. Amongst the two horses one is good (i.e. spirititive) and the other bad (i.e. appetitive). The appetitive

horse is unruly and hardly yields to the control of reason. In the Republic, Plato portrays it as a "many-headed beast with heads of wild and tame animals all around it, which it can produce and change at will" (588 e). But the spirititive horse unlike the appetitive one is guided by reason and supports reason's ruling. When the appetite acts as a rebel against the verdict of reason, the spirititive part functions as a troop against the rebels to control them. But sometimes the appetites are so strong that they overpower the spirititive part. Thus akrasia is a result of appetites overpowering the spirit. Walsh (1963, pp. 41 - 42) observes that:

Plato's position, then is that there are certain appetites which in their own nature are anarchic, that there is also a form of anger (spirit) which can be directed against these appetites, much as a squad of police can be directed against an unruly mob. Presumably, when this battle is won by the mob, we have akrasia.

Thus the division of the soul into three parts (the rational, spirititive and appetitive) shows that, these different parts of the soul motivate human action in different directions. The measurement or calculation of what is right or what is wrong is done by the rational part of the soul. The appetitive part is a source of all emotional desires like sex, food, drink etc. These emotional desires sometimes do not care for the agent's judgement of the good and are so strong that they motivate human action against the agent's better judgement. So Plato shows that there are motivational conflicts in the agent. Plato in fact distributes the motivational strength over to various faculties,

which results in motivational conflict. But for Socrates there is no such competitor to knowledge, except ignorance. For him if one has the knowledge one cannot do evil. And when one does evil he does it out of ignorance. But Plato's contention that there are some appetites that over power the knowledge, seems to approach the truth pertaining to human nature, than Socrates' position that knowledge rules out any such over powering. Because the Socratic conception of rationality is such that motivation is built into it. It seems his faith in human rationality is so strong that people even cannot desire evil things. Plato's position is that often we have conflicts, i.e. the conflict between motives (or desires). The battle between the appetite and the spirit shows that how the spirit sometimes fails to control the unruly appetitive desires, and reason (knowledge) becomes unsuccessful in motivating human action.

We agree with Plato for he takes into account the existence of motivational conflict. Though reason is superior to the other parts of the soul, it sometimes lacks the motivational capacity to pursue the right course of action. It shows that human beings sometimes act against what they think is the right course of action.

## NOTES

1. In the Protagoras 349, Plato enumerates five kinds of virtue, i.e. wisdom, courage, holiness, temperance and justice. He claims that all virtues are one; and are forms of knowledge (Protagoras 329). Justice, courage, wisdom, temperance, and holiness, manifest themselves in the action of a virtuous person in different circumstances.
2. Gould (1955) suggests that to know how to be virtuous is to be virtuous, as an alternative to the traditional interpretation that to know what is virtue is to be virtuous. He takes the Rylian approach of knowing how and knowing that. We do not want to go into the details of this approach here.
3. Valstos, G. Protagoras, Editors introduction, liberal Art Press, INC. (1956) p. XXXIX. K refers to the proposition that knowledge is virtue.
4. Plato does not give a full account of human psychology. His division of soul does not describe a large part of human psychology, namely sensation and perception. It, however, gives an account of human psychology which is related to the discussion of moral conflict and decision.



## CHAPTER III

### THE ARISTOTELIAN RESOLUTION

The Socratic dictum 'virtue is knowledge' asserts that knowledge is superior and it governs human action. The concept of knowledge Plato presents in the Protagoras, 352 b clearly shows that knowing determines desire and motivates human action in such a way that right action invariably follows from it. So it is impossible for a man to 'do wrong knowingly'. The cause of one's wrong doing or acting against what he knows best is ignorance. Socrates concludes from this that akrasia never occurs. As we have discussed in the preceding chapter, the truth of this thesis for Socrates is a truth pertaining to human nature. He establishes this truth by means of a purely deductive argument without appealing to empirical facts. Later on Plato, in the Republic, takes into account empirical facts about human nature. His division of the soul shows the occurrence of motivational conflict which refutes the Socratic view.

Aristotle also parts company with Socrates. He appeals to our day to day common experience and claims that it is a fact of human nature that people sometimes act contrary to what they know or believe to be right, or do what they know or believe to be wrong. He blames Socrates for not considering this fact of our common experience. He remarks that the Socratic standpoint (i.e. the denial of akrasia) 'plainly contradicts observed facts'<sup>1</sup>

(Nicomachean Ethics, hence forth N.E. 1145 b, 28). Aristotle puts forth the view that akrasia is not only possible but is frequently exemplified in ordinary life. Let us therefore turn to the Aristotelian view that there are cases of akrasia. This will require an understanding and examination of Aristotle's conception of knowledge and virtue.

Aristotle broadly distinguishes virtues into moral virtues and intellectual virtues. The examples he cites for moral virtues are liberty, temperance and courage. Wisdom, understanding and practical wisdom are illustrated as intellectual virtues. Moral virtues, he says, are virtues of character. When we talk about someone's character we always mean whether he is courageous or coward, whether he is good tempered or ill-tempered. So while judging someone's character we never say whether he is wise or say whether he has understanding. Of course, we commend wise persons for their state of mind (N.E. 1103a, 3 - 10).

Intellectual virtues of course play an important role in Aristotle's Ethics. Aristotle holds the view that one should not only concern himself with the universal truth concerning the good life in general, but also with particular actions which virtue requires him to do in particular situations. We will only briefly touch upon the intellectual virtues which have an important bearing on our discussion of Aristotle's conception of akrasia.

## I. THE INTELLECTUAL VIRTUES

Aristotle divides the soul into two parts: the rational and the irrational. The rational comprises: (1) The contemplation of objects whose originaive causes are invariable: it is called the theoretical/scientific faculty; and (ii) the contemplation of contingent things: it is called the practical/deliberative/calculative faculty. Thus Aristotle characterises human reason as both theoretical and practical. The role of theoretical reason is to know universal principles and the role of practical reason is to know the individual facts and apply them to particular situations (N.E. 1139a, 5 - 15). We will return to the discussion of the role of practical reason later, because it will facilitate the understanding of Aristotle's analysis of akrasia.

Aristotle further maintains that there are three regulating elements in the soul, which are sensation, reason and desire. Out of these, sensation does not generate any action. The other two elements determine/govern human action in different ways (N.E. 1139a, 1 - 20).

For Aristotle the states by virtue of which the soul possesses truth are five: (a) Scientific Knowledge, (b) Art, (c) Practical Wisdom, (d) Intuitive Reason, and (e) Theoretical Wisdom (N.E. vi, 3).

## (a) SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE

Scientific knowledge concerns what is necessary and eternal. It is considered to be capable of being taught. All teaching begins either by induction or by syllogism. Although induction is the starting point from which syllogism proceeds, it is not a scientific process. Scientific knowledge is then a state of capacity to demonstrate (N.E. 1139b, 20 - 35).

## (b) ART

Art is identical with a capacity to create. It involves a true course of reasoning. All Art is concerned with making something and the origin of which is not in the thing made but in the maker. It is related to things which neither come into being by necessity nor in accordance with nature. Aristotle makes a clearcut distinction between making and acting. Art, he says, is a matter of making. The rational capacity concerned with doing is distinct from the rational capacity concerned with making (N.E. 1140a, 3 - 5). Aristotle says: 'While making has an end other than itself, action cannot; because good action itself is its end (N.E. 1140b, 7 - 9).

## (c) PRACTICAL WISDOM

Aristotle defines practical wisdom as the capacity to deliberate well about what is good and desirable for oneself, and the good life in general. He points out that practical wisdom is concerned with action. The practically wise man has the capacity to be right in his calculation of means to any moral end, i.e.,

he has the capacity of right deliberation. Practical wisdom is different from scientific knowledge and art. Scientific knowledge consists in a capacity to demonstrate; for its first principles are invariable. But the things whose first principles are variable cannot be demonstrated. Since it is impossible to deliberate about necessary things, practical knowledge is not scientific knowledge (N.E. 1140a, 30 - b1). Also, it is not art because, as we have seen, action and creation are different.

Practical wisdom is concerned with both the universal (i.e. what is the good life in general) and the particular (i.e. with particular actions). Aristotle maintains that practical wisdom comprises knowledge of particular situations. To illustrate:

Nor is practical wisdom concerned with universal only -it must also recognize the particulars; for it is practical, and practice is concerned with particulars. This is why some one who do not know, and especially those who have experience, are more practical than others who know; for if a man knew that light meats are digestible and wholesome, but did not know which sorts of meat are light, he would not produce health, but the man who knows that chicken is whole some is more likely to produce health (N.E. 1141b, 14 - 21).

This clearly shows that practical wisdom involves action. That is why one should have both the universal and the particular forms of practical wisdom or at least the particular form of it which is necessary to produce right action. Richard Sorabji (1973/74, p. 113) makes the following suggestion:

Whatever other roles the practical wisdom may or may not play, I suggest that one role is this. It enables a man, in

the light of his conception of the good life in general to perceive what generosity requires him, or more generally what virtue and to kalon requires him in the particular case, and it instructs him to act accordingly. A picture of good life will save him from giving away too much, or too little, or to the wrong causes, in particular instances.

Aristotle defines virtue as lying between two extremes of excess and defect, i.e. as a mean which is determined by man of practical wisdom (N.E. 1107a, 1 - 2). Since practical wisdom is concerned with knowing just what to do in a particular situation, it turns out to be ultimately concerned with making choices about right kind of means.

Aristotle has pointed out that the role of practical wisdom is to 'perceive' what to do in a particular situation. He draws an analogy between practical wisdom and sense perception:

... practical wisdom is concerned with the ultimate particular, which is the object not of scientific knowledge but of perception - not the perception of qualities peculiar to one sense but a perception akin to that by which we perceive that the particular figure before us is a triangle; for in that direction as well as in that of the major premiss there will be a limit. But this is rather perception than practical wisdom, though it is another kind of perception than that of the qualities peculiar to each sense (N.E. 1142a, 27 - 30).

At the same time Aristotle is aware of some significant difference between the two. He says that this kind of perception might come from mere experience. Experienced and older people or of people of practical wisdom not less than to demonstrations; because experience has given them an eye they see aright (N.E. 1143b, 11 - 14). Practical wisdom invokes perception of what to

do in particular situation and arrives at that by the help of knowledge of some thing more universal. That is why practical wisdom is contrasted with experience (N.E. 1141b, 16 - 21).

It seems Aristotle is 'somewhat at a loss' in specifying precisely which type of perception is involved in practical matters (i.e. whether experience, or perception). Yet it appears that Aristotle visualizes some form of practical moral perception (Walsh, 1963, p. 140).

In N.E. book VI, 1144a, 21 - 25, Aristotle takes the stand that practical wisdom needs cleverness to do the things one wants to do in particular situations. Cleverness is concerned with means and end. If the end is noble, then cleverness is praiseworthy but if the end is bad cleverness is mere smartness. Therefore we call the man of practical wisdom clever or smart (N.E. 1144a, 25 - 30).

The function of practical wisdom demands an understanding of the moral significance of a particular situation. This will help us in the interpretation of Aristotle's conception of moral weakness (akrasia).

#### (d) INTUITIVE REASON

Intuitive reason, for Aristotle, grasps the first principle by induction. Science begins with this first principle. As Ross points out, 'this is to be understood not as the perfect

induction' of modern logician, which does not lead to knowledge of genuine universal, nor as their imperfect induction, which reaches a probable conclusion. It should be understood as a process by means of which after experience of a few particular instances the mind grasps the universal truth and it becomes self evident afterwards. Induction is considered to be the activity of intuitive reason in this sense (Ross, Aristotle, p. 217).

#### (e) THEORETICAL WISDOM

Theoretical wisdom or Philosophic wisdom (sophia) is a combination of scientific knowledge and intuitive reason. It is superior to practical wisdom. It does not determine what is to be done in a particular situation. On the other hand, practical wisdom is concerned with a particular situation, about which it is possible to deliberate, and which can be brought about by action (N.E. 1141b, 10). For practice is concerned with particulars. Theoretical wisdom is utilized in theoretical sciences, such as metaphysics and mathematics.

Before we discuss akrasia, it may be helpful to discuss the concept of practical reason because it is concerned with the deliberative/calculative faculty. Let us now examine the notions of deliberation, choice and practical syllogism all of which fall under practical reasoning and play an important role in Aristotle's account of moral weakness (akrasia).



## II DELIBERATION (Bouleusis)

'We deliberate about things', as Aristotle says, 'that are in our power and can be done' (N.E. 1112a, 30). 'We deliberate not about ends but about means' (N.E. 112b, 13). Deliberation assumes a determinant end and considers how this can be achieved. To quote Aristotle:

We deliberate not about ends but about means. For a doctor does not deliberate whether he shall heal, nor an orator whether he shall persuade, nor a statesman whether he shall produce law and order, nor does any one else deliberate about his end. They assume the end and consider how and by what means it is to be attained; and if it seems to be produced by several means they consider by which it is most easily and best produced, while if it is achieved by one only they consider how it will be achieved by this and by what means this will be achieved, till they come to the first cause, which in order of discovery is the last. For the person who deliberates seems to investigate and analyse in the way described as though he were analysing a geometrical construction (not all investigation appears to be deliberation - for distance mathematical investigations - but all deliberation is investigation), and what is last in the order of analysis seems to be first in the order of becoming (N.E. 1112b, 12 - 24).

Deliberation always begins with an assumed end. One's desire for the end prompts one to arrive at the means which can be adopted here and now. The process through which the means is achieved is like that of a mathematician who works back from the problem to be solved to a simpler problem, whose solution would enable him to solve the other, and so on until he comes to one which he can solve with the knowledge already at his disposal; 'the last step in the analysis is first to be taken in fact' (Ross, Aristotle, p. 199). The particular means is achieved

when we reach at the first cause. In the process of discovering it is the last, but it is adopted first to show what can be done here and now. Hence deliberation is a search for means which starts with a desired end to arrive at a particular means (i.e. what one can do here and now) which is within our power.

Ando, (1971, p. 216) has pointed out that though deliberation contains practical reasoning, sometimes it is considered as a technical reasoning. It is exemplified by healing, oration, or administration. It is also illustrated by navigation, gymnastics and accumulation of wealth, in N.E. book III, 1112b, 6 - 10 he says these 'conducts are all productions, so that deliberation about them is technical'.

Practice is described as a 'mere actualisation of factual form'. The distinction between practice and production is not clear enough in Aristotle. Deliberation is concerned with the means, whereas the end of production lies in the results, and that of practice in the act itself. Deliberation in production is thinking of the process which leads to the end i.e. thinking of the means in the strict sense. But practice is not a movement that realises its factual end gradually, it is an actuality without process. Thus arriving at 'a practical end cannot be the thinking as to the cause and effect in the ordinary sense, but the thinking as to subordination or subsumption of practical values or at least the application of a rule on an individual case'. (Ando, 1971, p. 216 - 217).

Now let us discuss the correctness of deliberation which, according to Aristotle, is a measure of its excellence. Since, there being more than one kind of correctness, plainly excellence in deliberation is not any and every kind of correctness because

1. the incontinent man and the bad man, if he is clever, will reach as a result of his calculation what he sets before himself, so that he will have deliberated correctly, but he will have got for himself great evil. So all correctness is not good things. To deliberate well is a good thing, because it is this kind of correctness of deliberation, that is excellence in deliberation, which tends to attain what is good (N.E. 1142b, 17 - 22).
2. Aristotle says that by false syllogism one can attain the good also. To attain what one ought to do but not by the right means, the middle term being false, is not yet excellence in deliberation. This is a state in virtue of which one attains what one ought to but not by right means (N.E. 1142b, 22 - 26).
3. It is possible that one may attain it by long deliberation while another man attains it quickly. Therefore the man who attains it quickly does not yet get the excellence in deliberation, which Aristotle holds is rightness with regard to the expedient - rightness in respect both of the end, the manner and the time (N.E. 1142b, 27 - 28).
4. Further, it is possible to have deliberated well either in the unqualified sense or with reference to a particular end.

Excellence in deliberation in unqualified sense, then, is that which succeeds with reference to what is the end in the unqualified sense and excellence in deliberation in a particular sense, that which succeeds relatively to a particular end (N.E. 1142b, 28 - 30).

It is the man of practical wisdom, whose characteristics is to deliberate well. So excellence in deliberation will be correctness with regard to what conduces to the end of which practical wisdom is the true apprehension (N.E. 1142b, 27 - 33). But Ando (1971) points out that it is not accurate to take practical wisdom merely as apprehension of a good end'. Because the establishment of purpose is the function, of desire. Our desire for certain end prompts us to reason by what means we can attain the end. The virtue of the desire is an ethical virtue. As we have seen practical wisdom is an intellectual virtue and its function is not to fix an end, rather it is confined to the consideration of means. It is not distinguishable from deliberation or cleverness. Hence, 'practical wisdom must contain both the good end and the excellent calculation (p. 218). So it is difficult to distinguish excellence of deliberation from practical wisdom.

### III. CHOICE (Prohairesis)

Choice is deliberate desire of things in our power: first we make decision or arrive at an understanding of means as a result

of deliberation, what is to be done here and now in order to achieve a desired end and then pursue our aim in accordance with deliberation (N.E. 1112a, 15 - 16; 1113a, 10 - 11). As we have seen, ends are fixed and we do not need any preparatory reasoning to set them and deliberation is concerned with the means through which we arrive at our desired end. 'The object of choice then, says Aristotle, is one of the things in our own power, which is desired after deliberation (N.E. 1113a, 10). It seems as if choice is merely one type of desire (which is desired after deliberation). But Aristotle suggests that it is not right to say that choice is a kind of desire or a kind of opinion (N.E. 1111b, 10). He divides desire into three different parts i.e. wish (boulesis), passion or anger (thumos), and appetite (epithumia)<sup>2</sup> (De Anima, 414b 2, Ethica Eudemia, hence forth E.E., 1223a, 26 - 27, N.E. 1111b, 10 - 15).

Passion or anger and appetite are common to irrational creatures. But choice is not common to irrational creatures. So choice cannot be identified with passion or anger or appetite. Aristotle further points out that 'the incontinent man acts with appetite but not with choice; while the continent man on the contrary acts with choice but not with appetite (N.E. 1111b, 10 - 15).

Choice also cannot be identified with wish. Because (1) we may even wish impossible things. (2) we may wish things which cannot be brought about by our own efforts. Aristotle says we

always choose things which can be brought about by our own action; no one chooses things which are not within his power or cannot be brought about by his own action. (3) Wish is related to the ends and choice to the means. We choose the means to our end (N.E. 1111b, 20 - 25).

Thus, what we wish is for an end but what we choose rather is a means to an end; and wish is sometimes beyond our control but choice in general is related to things which are in our own power.

Aristotle also maintains that choice cannot be identified with opinion or belief. Because choice is considered to be either good or bad, but opinion/belief is either true or false. Besides, we choose what we best know to be good, but we opine when we do not quite know (N.E. 1112a 1 - 10).

Hence choice is distinguished from appetite, anger and wish, and also from opinion/belief. It is related to something in our own power and that the object of choice is what has been decided in previous deliberation (N.E. 1112a, 15 - 16).

Choice perhaps is a combination of both desire and reason. Choice in order to be good, should have true reasoning and right desire (N.E. 1129a, 25). It is not merely desire plus reason, but desire guided by reason and reason fired by desire (Ross, Aristotle, p. 200).

So, choice in order to be good must follow from what the reason (i.e. calculative or practical) asserts. Because reason discovers the means to the end. The good state of contemplative theoretical reason is truth and the object of reason in its calculative/practical form is truth in agreement with right desire, (N.E. 1139a, 25 - 30) which means the truth about the means to the satisfaction of right desire. Man is considered as an originator of action - a union of desire and reason. (Ross, Aristotle, p. 216). The origin of action is culmination of both reason and desire, which aims at a particular end.

Aristotle, says that the origin of action its efficient cause, not its final cause is choice, and that of choice is desire and reasoning with view to an end (N.E. 1139a, 31 - 33). Choice is either desireful reason or reasonable desire, and that sort of origin of action is man (N.E. 1139b, 4).

#### IV. PRACTICAL SYLLOGISM:

In the context of rational decision - making in and through deliberation and choice Aristotle develops his view concerning how we arrive at a conclusion as to what we ought to act as a result of an inferential process. This is generally referred to as practical syllogism. Practical syllogism has two types of premisses. one of them being universal and the other particular.

The universal premiss gives us general information about what one ought to do and the particular concerned with the concrete situation. In De Anima, (434a, 17 - 22) Aristotle explains the structure or the form of the practical syllogism as follows:

... the one premiss or judgement is universal and the other deals with particular (for the first tells us that such and such kind of man should do such and such kind of act, and the second that this is an act of the kind meant, and I a person of the type intended), it is the later opinion that really originates movement not the universal; or rather it is both, but the one does so while it remains in a state more like rest, while the other partakes in movement.

From these two premisses, (i.e. universal and particular) of the practical syllogism a conclusion is drawn. The conclusion is not simply an affirmation; it is an action. In Prior and Posterior Analytics, Aristotle, discusses demonstrative syllogism. The conclusion of a demonstrative syllogism necessarily follows from the premisses and gives us only knowledge. In N.E. Aristotle makes a distinction between theoretical syllogism and practical syllogism. In practical syllogism the conclusion directly leads to an action. He holds that the conclusion of a practical syllogism causes practice. To wit him:

... we may also view the cause as follows with reference to the fact of human nature. The one opinion is universal, the other is concerned with the particular facts, and here we come to something within the sphere of perception; when a single opinion results from the two, the soul must in one type of case (i.e. scientific reasoning or theoretical reasoning) affirm the conclusion, while in the case of opinions concerned with production it must immediately act (e.g. if 'everything sweet ought to be tasted'; and 'this is sweet'; in the sense of being one of the particular sweet things, the man who can act and is not prevented must at the same time actually act accordingly) (N.E. 1147a, 25 - 30, first bracket and the emphasis added).



The remarkable feature of a practical syllogism is that its conclusion results in practice, and is distinguished from the theoretical syllogism, whose conclusion results in knowledge.

In a practical syllogism the two premisses (i.e. universal and particular) taken together produce action, i.e. given the two premisses the agent acts straight away. One who accepts the conclusion of the practical syllogism acts in accordance with it. Someone who does not do the act which is presented by the conclusion of the practical syllogism, repudiates either of the premisses or the process by means of which the conclusion is drawn.

In De Motu Animalium (701a, 19 - 23) Aristotle asserts that the conclusion of the practical syllogism is an action. He puts forth the example that 'If I need a covering, and if a cloak is a covering, I need a cloak. Similarly, what I need I ought to make; I need a cloak, so, I ought to make a cloak. And he says that the conclusion, 'I ought to make a cloak' is an action. The conclusion can also be verbally formulated as decision to act or can be stated as a proposition. But Aristotle says that the conclusion 'I ought to make a cloak is an action'. It seems, that the verbal formulation of the conclusion is part and parcel of action 'rather than an episode which precedes it'. Here the problem is that, if the verbal formulation is part and parcel of the action then it is far from clear how sometimes an agent formulates a prescriptive conclusion but does not act according

to it (Hardie, 1968, p. 241). We will examine this while discussing Aristotle's conception of incontinence. However Aristotle is not very clear whether the conclusion of a practical syllogism is a proposition or statement or it is an action. In De Motu Animalium he presents both the views (for an extensive discussion on this point, see Charles, David, 1984 pp. 84 - 96).

## V. INCONTINENCE (Akrasia)

According to Aristotle akrasia does occur. Let us see how Aristotle treats this problem in spite of his strong faith in human reason and knowledge, which he shares with Socrates and Plato. Aristotle does not have any fundamental disagreement with the Socratic doctrine (i.e. 'knowledge is virtue'). Along with Socrates and Plato he also holds the view that knowledge cannot be overcome by appetite or passion. It cannot be dragged about like a slave. Knowledge always rules and gives proper direction to human action. A higher faculty (i.e. reason) should not be overcome by a lower faculty (i.e. Passion or appetite) (De Anima, 434a, 10 - 15). In E.E. he comments on the Socratic pronouncement (regarding wisdom and knowledge) that 'virtue is knowledge' in following manner.

Socrates, then ... thought the knowledge of virtue to be the end, and use to enquire what is justice, what is bravery and each of the part of the virtue; and his conduct was responsible, for he thought all the virtues to be a kind of knowledge, so that to know justice and to be just come simultaneously; for the moment that we have learned geometry

or architecture we are architects and geometers (E.E. 1216b, 3 - 9 emphasis added).

But Aristotle (though agrees to the Socratic view) goes deep into the problem and tries to explicate the situation in which a man can do what he knows to be wrong. He analyses the possibility of and the reasons for someone's acting incontinently. In other words, he seeks to answer the question, 'in what sense can the incontinent person be said to have possessed knowledge?' And if the cause of akrasia is ignorance, 'what is the nature of this ignorance?'

Aristotle starts his inquiry with the denial of the relevance of the distinction between knowledge and opinion. First, because if the akrate only has opinion or belief, but not knowledge that the action is wrong, then his action is forgivable. He says that belief/opinion is weaker than knowledge. So the agent's conviction is weak and is not firm. When the agent does not have firm conviction about his action, we cannot blame him for his wrong doing (N.E. 1146a, 1 - 5). But Aristotle holds that the akrate is blame-worthy for his wrong doing. He also discards this distinction between knowledge and belief/opinion as a solution to the problem of akrasia. The solution is that the akrate does not have knowledge, but only has opinion and akrasia is a case of opinion being overcome. His contention is that this distinction does not portray belief/opinion as weaker in conviction or certainty. Sometimes

opinion is as firm as knowledge. He cites Heraclitus as an example who was firmly convinced and fully certain of what he thinks though he did not know (N.E. 1146b, 24 - 30).

Aristotle casts aside the claim that the akrate acts against practical wisdom. Because, for him, it is absurd that the same man will be practically wise and at the same time incontinent. Aristotle writes:

Is it then practical wisdom whose resistance is mastered? That is the strongest of all states. But this is absurd; the same man will be at once practically wise and incontinent, but no one would say that it is part of a practically wise man to do willingly the best acts. Besides, it has been shown earlier that the man of practical wisdom is one who will act (for he is a man concerned with the individual facts) and who has the other virtues (N.E. 1146a, 4 - 9).

So the practically wise man recognises both the universal and the particular premisses, for the universal one alone will not lead to action. Thus practical wisdom is concerned with action. 'Practical wisdom necessarily involves commitment, and that an incontinent man could not count as committed to right conduct' (Hardie, 1968, p. 274).

## VI. ARISTOTLE'S SOLUTION OF THE PROBLEM OF AKRASIA

Aristotle gives four different solutions to the problem : if the incontinent man acts with knowledge then in what sense does he (akrates) act with knowledge?

(a) First of all, he draws a distinction between potentiality and actuality, i.e. between having or possessing knowledge and exercising or using one's knowledge. Here what Aristotle tries to point out is that the incontinent man (akrates) knows that his act is wrong and possesses this knowledge potentially, but is not exercising or using this knowledge at the time of action. To quote Aristotle:

... for one who possesses knowledge of science but not actually exercising it knows the science potentially in a sense, though not in the same sense as he knows it before he learnt it. And when he is in this condition if something does not prevent him, he actively exercises his knowledge. Otherwise he would be in the contradictory state of not knowing (Physics 255b, 1 - 5).

Aristotle holds the view that exercising one's knowledge is equivalent to contemplating that knowledge. It will not be strange, according to him, if the agent acts against the knowledge which is not contemplated, but it will be strange if the agent acts against the knowledge which is contemplated. He says that,

it will make a difference whether when a man does what he should not; he has knowledge but is not exercising it, or is exercising it; for the latter seem strange not the former (N.E. 1146b, 31 - 35).

The point that he makes here is that one can do wrong action when the knowledge of the right is only potentially present in him (or is at the back of his mind); but one cannot do a wrong action if the knowledge of the right is operating at the time of doing the act. The incontinent man has the knowledge that his action

is wrong, in the sense that it prevails as an intellectual ability in him. But he does not know it in the sense that he does not use it at the time of his action.

(b) The second solution to the problem comprises Aristotle's doctrine of practical syllogism. A practical syllogism has two kinds of premisses, one of them is universal and the other particular. While the universal premiss gives us the general principle that such and such an act should be done, the particular gives us the knowledge that this is an act of that kind. In case of akrasia the agent (who acts against his knowledge) uses the universal premiss but does not use the particular. The universal premiss has also two types of terms. One is predicable of the object and the other of the agent. For example in 'dry food is good for every man', dry takes the object and man the agent. There are two particular premisses, which particularise the two terms in the universal, such as 'I am a man', and 'such and such food is dry'. The akrates has the knowledge of the major premiss that 'dry food is good for every man'. He also knows the minor premiss that 'I am a man' and 'food of particular type is dry', but he either has not or is not exercising the knowledge of a crucial part of the minor premiss, namely that 'the food before him is of that type' (N.E. 1147a, 7).

Aristotle says that an incontinent action will not seem strange or paradoxical when the agent does not exercise the

knowledge of the minor premiss; it would be extraordinary if the agent exercises the knowledge and act incontinently (N.E. 1147a, 7 - 9). N.E. 1147a, 5 - 10 show that the akrates fails to draw the right conclusion<sup>3</sup> either because he lacks the knowledge of the minor premiss or is not exercising or using the knowledge of the minor premiss. The akrates' failure to draw the right conclusion means that he lacks the knowledge of particular premiss. Hence the agent does not act in accordance with the practical syllogism. So, Aristotle maintains that the ignorance of the minor premiss is the cause of incontinence (1147a 4).

Now if the problem is the agent's ignorance of the minor premiss then the agent will not be blamed for his wrong doing. As Ross (Aristotle, p. 223) points out, according to Aristotle this ignorance of the particular fact would make the action involuntary.<sup>4</sup> But since the incontinent man acts voluntarily (or intentionally, to use modern terminology), he is responsible for his action. To defend the thesis that the akrates acts voluntarily, Aristotle distinguishes between acting through ignorance from acting in ignorance. In case of acting through ignorance the agent is ignorant of the particular fact. In such an act neither desire nor intention is involved. For example one kills one's own son, mistaking him for an enemy (N.E. 1111a, 10 - 15). Here, an unintended consequence occurs because of the agent's ignorance of the particular fact, which makes an action involuntary and the agent is not to be blamed for it.

On the other hand we hold the agent responsible for his act who acts in ignorance. Because:

Acting by reason of ignorance seems also to be different from acting in ignorance, for a man who is drunk or in a rage is thought to act as a result not of ignorance but of one of the causes mentioned, yet not knowingly but in ignorance (N.E. 1110b, 24 - 27, emphasis added).

The ignorance of the particular fact here is not through ignorance rather it is because of a state of the agent, i.e., he may be under the influence of drink or anger. This drunken state might influence him not to take note of the particular fact. For example the agent may know that taking too much liquor makes one drunk, but may not notice the fact that he is drinking too much. Aristotle says that the agent here does not act involuntarily and is therefore blame-worthy for his action. 'The ignorance here is not a mistake which changes the nature of an action. It is rather part of the vicious action itself'... (Walsh, 1963, p. 115 - 116). So acting in ignorance is associated with incontinent action. An incontinent person who drinks too much and is also ignorant of the quantity of wine he takes while drinking is not involuntary in his act as one who drinks spirit while being ignorant of the fact that it is wine. (See Ando, 1971, p. 247) The incontinent man faults when in ignorance he fails to notice the particular fact that he is drinking too much. <sup>5</sup> He is tempted by the appetite of drinking. So he is responsible for his action. In the fourth solution we will discuss how passion or appetite hinders the agent to act in



accordance with the practical syllogism. Thus the incontinent man has knowledge of the universal premisses but does not act in accordance with it because of lack of knowledge of the particular premiss (i.e. This food is dry).

(c) In the third solution Aristotle tells us how the agent possesses the knowledge only in a scanty way. Here again he has in mind the distinction between actual and potential knowledge. According to Aristotle the person who possesses the knowledge but does not use it is like a person asleep or drunk or mad. The influence of passion such as anger and sexual appetites produces fits of madness in people. The incontinent people are in the same state as the people who are asleep, drunk or mad. Under the influence of passion people can utter the verses of Empedocles without knowing what they are uttering. It is similar to the act of people who have just begun to learn science and put together its phrases which they have not yet understood; because knowledge has to be assimilated and that takes time. So we must suppose that an incontinent person uses language as an actor does on the stage, without any understanding. (N.E. 1147a, 10 - 24). Here the incontinent man has knowledge in one sense and does not have it in another sense. The incontinent man at the moment of his act 'sometimes utters or sounds the moral maxim, that is no proof that he then actually knows them'. (Ross, Aristotle, p. 223) This suggest that the incontinent man possesses the knowledge which is not effective in producing action. Though he

mouthes 'I ought to do this' or 'this is wrong', he does not act on it.

Robinson (1969, p. 143) points out that in the third solution Aristotle holds that the akrates does not know fully the nature of his act while performing it. Aristotle seems to maintain the same view which Socrates holds i.e., knowledge cannot be dragged about like a slave when it is fully present. But Robinson says that the substantial difference between Socrates and Aristotle is that for Aristotle the state of akrates' knowledge might change in a significant way when akrasia occurs. The akrates might know perfectly well the nature of his act both before and after his mistake but not at the time of committing the act.

In the fourth and last solution, Aristotle offers us a psychological explanation of the problem of akrasia. He takes the help of practical syllogism for the analysis. He says, when both the universal and particular premisses of the practical syllogism are combined one must necessarily do the action; and in case of theoretical or demonstrative syllogism one must draw the conclusion. For example if everything sweet ought to be tasted, and this is sweet, then the agent who is capable and not prevented must immediately act accordingly. (N.E. 1147a, 29 - 31). It is impossible for the agent to reach the conclusion of the practical syllogism and not act in accordance with it. Because for Aristotle the conclusion of a practical syllogism is

an action. (De Motu Animalium 701a, 19 - 21) And the practically wise person always does what ought to be done (see N.E. 1146a, 8, 1152a, 8 - 10). So, the knowledge involved here is not mere knowing but acting.<sup>6</sup>

But the akrates does not act in accordance with the practical syllogism. So Aristotle explains what happens when the akrates fails to do what the practical syllogism prescribes. The explanation he provides is that the akrates does not do the appropriate action, because desire happens to be present in us which prevent us from producing the action. He writes:

When, then, the universal judgement is present in us forbidding us to taste, and there is also an the opinion that 'everything sweet is pleasant' and that 'this is sweet' (now this is the opinion that is active), and when appetite happens to be present in us, the one opinion bids us avoid the object, but appetite leads us towards it (for it can move each of our bodily parts); so that it turns out that a man behaves incontinently under the influence (in a sense) of rule and an opinion, and of one not contrary in itself, but only incidentally - for the appetite is contrary, not the opinion-to the right rule (N.E. 1147a, 33 - 62).

So, there are two different kinds of syllogism present here with two types of universal premisses. One universal judgement<sup>7</sup> 'forbids us to taste' ('sweet things should not be tasted'), and the other universal judgement is stated as 'all sweet things are pleasant' with the minor premiss 'this is sweet'. This latter judgement is active, says Aristotle. These two universal judgements respectively constitute the major premiss of the two syllogisms. The first syllogism is called the moral syllogism and the second is dubbed as the syllogism of appetite. These two

types of syllogisms do not oppose each other logically. The major premiss of the appetitive syllogism only accidentally conflicts with the major premiss of the prohibiting syllogism. ('All sweet things are pleasant' does not contradict the principle that 'sweet things should not be tasted'. But on particular occasions the syllogism of appetite gears on to action which is contrary to the moral syllogism.

Let us see what happens when these two principles come to an occasional conflict. The moral syllogism bids us to 'Avoid sweet things' but 'sensual desire leads us towards it' (for appetite can move each of our bodily parts). Though the akrates reaches the conclusion that 'this should be avoided', he does not act in accordance with it because sensual desire drags him to the contrary action. So the presence of this sensual desire prevents the moral syllogism from being productive.

Scholars differ on the issue whether both the syllogisms have the same minor premiss namely 'This is sweet', which enables the agent to arrive at the conclusions 'avoid this' or 'taste this'. Robinson (1969, p. 145) says that the particular premiss belonging to the right (moral) syllogism is not the same as the one belonging to the wrong (appetite) syllogism. For the particular premiss is actual in the soul. If two particular premisses are the same then the right syllogism would be actual in the soul but it is not operative. But we argue that the minor premiss (this is sweet) is the same in both the syllogisms. The

avoided'. Aristotle says:

Now, the last premiss both being an opinion about perceptible object, and being what determines our actions, this a man either has not when he is in the state of passion, or has it in the sense in which having knowledge did not mean knowing but only talking, as a drunken man may utter the verses of Empedocles. And because the last term is not universal nor equally an object of scientific knowledge with the universal term, the position that Socrates sought to establish actually seems to result; for it is not in the presence of what is thought to be knowledge proper that the affection of incontinence arises (nor is it this that is dragged about as a result of the state of passion), but in that of perceptual knowledge (N.E. 1147b, 9 - 19).

It is here again Aristotle draws our attention to the third solution. There is again some kind of ignorance involved here because of which the agent does not do what he ought to do. Ross observes that the presence of ignorance explains away the moral struggle because the conclusion of the moral syllogism 'this should be avoided' is suppressed by appetite. (Aristotle p. 224) Aristotle's contention here can be interpreted to be showing how these two syllogisms come into conflict and how the agent acts contrary to the moral syllogism (though his reasoning is complete) the very fact that appetite or sensual desire is present accounts for the moral struggle. In NE 1102b, 15 - 19 Aristotle tells us about the moral struggle. He says:

For we praise the rational principle of the continent man and of the incontinent, and the part of their soul that has such a principle, since it urges them aright and towards the best objects; but there is found in them also another element naturally opposed to the rational principle, which fights against and resists that principle.

While distinguishing incontinence into two kinds, namely incontinence as impetuosity (propeteia) and as weakness (astheneia), Aristotle is also aware of a conflict, an active struggle between reason and desire. He shows how the sensual desire wins and the rational conclusion becomes inoperative, Aristotle states the distinction as follows:

Of incontinence one kind is impetuosity, another weakness. For some men after deliberating fail, owing to their emotion, to stand by the conclusion of their deliberation, others because they have not deliberated are led by their emotion; since some men (just as people who first tickled themselves), if they have first perceived and seen what is coming and have first roused themselves and their calculative faculty, are not defeated by their emotion, whether it be pleasant or painful. It is keen and excitable people that suffer specially from the impetuous form of incontinence; for the former by reason of their quickness and the latter by reason of the violence of their passions do not await the argument, because they are apt to follow their imagination (N.E. 1150b, 19 - 29, emphasis added).

If we take Aristotle's above quotation seriously, then, in case of weakness (astheneia) the akrates reaches the good conclusion but act contrary to it, i.e. after going through deliberation and choice he acts contrary to it. On the other hand, the impetuous akrates does not deliberate. He is carried away by his emotion or desire. He is too hasty to wait for the reason and disposed to follow his own impulses. He acts contrary to his choice too but the choice here is not that which he arrives at but against a choice he would have made. Because he acts on impulses his right choice is not realised. He does not deliberate, and that is why the good deliberative conclusion is present in him only in a dispositional sense.

But what is difficult to explain is the case of weak akrasia where the agent reaches right or good conclusion but acts contrary to it. Which is an upshot of the fourth solution and is crucial to the explanation of akrasia and which is the real akrasia, i.e. how can one act against the right conclusion which he arrives at through a process of reasoning. Why does this reasoning fail?

Aristotle here compares the incontinent man with the continent man. Both the incontinent and the continent hold the right decision. They both have the right rule. The continent man abides by his resolution. He succeeds in holding his decisions in fact and act accordingly, whereas the incontinent man fails to act according to his decision, for he is carried away by passion. This clearly shows that both the continent and the incontinent make right resolutions, they arrive at the right conclusion (N.E. 1152a, 25 - 28).

Now of the two kinds of incontinence i.e. impetuosity and weakness, Aristotle says that the impetuous akrates who does not deliberate is more curable than the weak akrates who deliberates but does not abide by his decision.

Aristotle further says that though the incontinent man acts against his decision, he is better than a self-indulgent person. The self-indulgent person is not inclined to repent for his action. For he goes with his choice. But any incontinent man is

likely to repent. He then says that a man of self-indulgence acts in accordance with his choice, while the incontinent acts contrary to his choice. The incontinent man's purpose is good but the self-indulgent or wicked man's purpose is bad. So Aristotle writes:

The incontinent man is like a city which possesses all the right decrees and has good laws, but makes no use of them, but the wicked man is like a city that uses its laws but has wicked laws to use (N.E. 1152a, 20 - 24).

He says that the self-indulgent person always follows his appetite and desire, but the incontinent person acts only accidentally or exceptionally against the moral principle. So "the self-indulgent man is incurable while the incontinent man is curable; for wickedness is like disease such as dropsy or consumption, while incontinence is like epilepsy; the former is a permanent, the latter an intermittent badness" (N.E. 1150b, 32 - 35).

Since sensual desire has the power to move our bodily parts (N.E. 1147a, 36 - 37). It wins over the rational decision of the agent and he acts contrary to his decision. So the incontinent man's rational faculty suffers because of the presence of sensual desire. In first three solutions Aristotle tries to establish epistemic deficiency in the akratic agent. In these solutions the akrates' failure is based on the logical distinction between having and using knowledge. His knowledge is clouded. But in the fourth solution which is based on Aristotle's doctrine of



practical syllogism provides a psychological explanation for the occurrence of akrasia. Though in the fourth solution also he talks about epistemic deficiency in the agent, he leaves room for the psychological analysis which is corroborated when he talks about the weak akrates who "after deliberating fail, owing to their emotion, to stand by the conclusions of their deliberation". The agent arrives at the right conclusion and judges that it is best not to taste sweet things than to taste it because of its pleasantness, but fails to act according to the best judgement or right reason. For his rational desire is opposed by the conflicting sensual desire. The competing desire overpowers the better judgement; hence the agent acts akratically. This shows that right reason or better judgement sometimes lacks sufficient motivational power to generate action. In N.E. 1139a, 35 - 36 Aristotle says that 'intellect by itself moves nothing'. It requires the motivational capacity to act with the rational decision or choice. This rational decision or choice or rational desire to act is overpowered by the irrational sensuous desire or emotion. The akratic failure is caused due to the motivational condition of the agent. Aristotle describes incontinent people as 'men under the influence of passion; for outbursts of anger and sexual appetites and some other such passions, it is evident, actually alter our bodily condition, and in some men even produce fits of madness' (N.E. 1147a, 14 - 18). The presence of sensual desires countervails the rational deliberative conclusion and leads to the akratic action. Thus

the motivational condition of the agent plays a crucial role in producing the akratic action. The influence of the psychological state of the agent causes the epistemic or intellectual failure. This shows the presence of motivational conflict in the agent. The rational decision fails due to the lack of motivational support. As we have already seen in Plato, Aristotle's account of akrasia is also seen to highlight the fact of motivational conflict being part of the structure of the akratic act.

## NOTES

1. About the translation of ta phenomena, as 'observed facts' (in Ross's translation) Owen (1967) mentions that Aristotle does not mean that 'the view plainly contradicts observed facts'. He is anxious, unlike Socrates, to leave a use for the expression 'knowing' what is right but doing what is wrong', but he is ready to show apriori that there is no use for this expression' (p. 170). Regarding this point Hardie (1968) points out that "it is not necessary to reject Ross's translation of "Phenomena" in 1145b, 28 as 'observed facts'. For there are different facts, with which the view of Socrates might be held to conflict' (p. 265).
2. This three fold division of desire resembles Plato's tripartite division of soul. The appetitive, spirititive and rational. This division casts light on the notion of conflict of motives. Similarly Aristotle has also divides desire into three parts, where wish fully obeys reason, anger or passion partially listen to the commands of reason and appetite does not yield to the rule of reason. By means of such a division he tries to spell out the conflict of desire or motive.
3. Dry food is good for all men  
I am a man,  
Such and such food is dry  
This food is such and such.

If the akrates does not know the last statement above or know it at the back of his mind, he shall not draw the conclusion.

4. Since that which is done under compulsion or by reason of ignorance (through ignorance) is involuntary, the voluntary would seem to be that of which the moving principle is in the agent himself, he being aware of the particular circumstances of the action. Presumably acts done by reason of anger, or appetite are not rightly called involuntary (N.E. 1111a, 21 - 25).
5. Ando (1971, p. 133) says that the ignorance involved in incontinent action must be the ignorance of value rather than the ignorance of fact. On this walsh (1963, p. 116) remarks that it is possible that this kind of ignorance includes ignorance of value but it can also include ignorance of fact. A drunken man is as responsible for his inability to tell pumice from granite as he is for his inability to remember that it is wrong to throw rocks at people. But Ando (1971, p. 133 n. 321) insists that what an incontinent man is ignorant of is, for example, that this is an excessive amount of wine, or that this woman is another man's wife. Both of these judgements contain some evaluation or at least qualification which are something more than mere facts'.
6. This stand point of Aristotle is no different from the socratic view point. Regarding this Robinson (1969, p.

144) remarks that what a paradoxical thesis! what a very Socratic thesis! I think it is the most Socratic sentence in the fundamentally Socratic chapter!

7. Aristotle has not stated how can the principle 'which forbids us to test' be formulated in a syllogistic form. However, interpreters have formulated this universal judgement as 'sweet things should not be tasted'.

## CHAPTER IV

### BACKSLIDING : THE PRESCRIPTIVIST VIEW

#### I

Hare revives the problem of akrasia in his The Language of Morals (1952, henceforth LM). In LM, he argues that it is logically impossible for someone to fail to do what he thinks he ought to do or do what he thinks he ought not to do. His polemic is rooted in the thesis that moral judgements are prescriptive and universalizable in nature.<sup>1</sup> He emphasises the action-guiding role of moral judgements, and says that when a man assents to a moral principle or holds a moral judgement he acts according to it.

Hare's arguments for the impossibility of akrasia is different from the Socratic denial of the problem. Nevertheless, the problem in his formulation also appears to be paradoxical, because sometimes we do certain things which we think we ought not to be doing, or do not do certain thing which we think we ought to be doing. Hare tries to resolve the paradox by contending that if one sincerely assents to do something when appropriate occasion arises and if it is within his psychological and physical power to do the action, then he does that action. Subsequently, in Freedom and Reason (1963) he cashes on this psychological power of the agent and holds that akrasia is

psychologically impossible. So for Hare, the akrates is a person either without any sincerity in his assent to the moral principle or lacking psychological power to perform the action.

In what follows we will expound what he means by assenting to a principle, the prescriptive and universalizable nature of value judgement and the nature of 'ought', which will enable us to show whether Hare succeeds in his endeavour to solve the problem of akrasia.

In LM (p. 1) he describes the language of morals as a kind of 'prescriptive language' and the pivotal function of 'moral principle is to guide conduct'. He tries to show that moral language is a species of prescriptive language. He compares moral language with other types of sentences with prescriptive character such as imperatives and argues that there is a logical similarity between imperatives and moral language. His contention is that 'the study of imperatives is by far the best introduction to the study of ethics' (LM, p. 2).

Further he draws the distinction between imperative and indicative sentences by saying that 'an indicative sentence is used for telling someone that something is the case; an imperative is not -it is used for telling someone to make something the case' (LM, p. 5). Imperatives can be brought under the single term 'command' and indicatives can be brought under the single term statement. Both commands and moral judgements

are prescriptions. He says that the language of statement and prescriptive language are different from each other. Because, when someone sincerely assents to a command it involves doing something, and when someone sincerely assents to a statement it involves believing something. Hare's conception of sincerely assenting to a 'command' and sincerely assenting to a 'statement' can be illustrated by the following passage from LM (pp. 19 - 20):

If we assent to a statement we are said to be sincere in our assent if and only if we believe that it is true (believe what the speaker said). If, on the other hand, we assent to a second-person command addressed to ourselves, we are said to be sincere in our assent if and only if we do or resolve to do what the speaker has told us to do; if we do not do it but only resolve to do it later, then if, when the occasion arises for doing it, we do not do it, we are said to have changed our mind; we are no longer sticking to the assent which we previously expressed. It is a tautology to say that we cannot sincerely assent to a second person command addressed to ourselves, and at the same time not perform it, if now is the occasion for performing it and it is in our (physical and psychological) power to do so. Similarly, it is a tautology to say that we cannot sincerely assent to a statement, and at the same time not believe it. Thus we may characterize provisionally the difference between statements and commands by saying that, whereas sincerely assenting to the former involves believing something, sincerely assenting to the latter involves (on the appropriate occasion and if it is within our power) doing something.

Taking cue from this passage, let us now discuss what Hare means by sincerely assenting to a moral judgement. Hare's position in this passage is that we can say someone has sincerely assented to the command addressed to him if he does or resolves to do what is indicated in the command. The arguments he develops here are for command. Later he develops arguments for



moral judgements. He states that moral judgements always have a possible bearing on our conduct, in that we 'cannot in the fullest sense accept them without conforming to them' (LM, p. 143). He argues that 'if value judgements are action guiding, they must be held to entail imperatives' (LM, p. 163). He distinguishes between the descriptive force and the evaluative forces of value words and states that when value-judgements are used evaluatively, they entail imperatives. Value judgements guide our action in an entirely different manner from the ordinary plain judgements of fact. He says that 'ought' sentences do not always entail imperatives; they do so only when they are used evaluatively (LM, p. 164).

The test he poses for deciding whether someone is using the judgement 'I ought to do X' as a value judgement or not is: 'Does he or does he not recognize that if he assents to the judgement, he must also assent to the command 'Let me do X' (LM, pp. 168 - 169). He recognises that holding this position invites the problem of 'weakness of will', i.e. 'the problem presented by a person who thinks, or professes to think, that he ought to do something but does not do it' (LM, p. 169).

Hare endorses that if we take this position that to assent to the judgement "I ought to do X", is also to assent to the command "Let me do X", along with what he says earlier (LM, p. 20) about the criterion for 'sincerely assenting a principle', (i.e. "it is logically impossible to assent to a command and at

the same time disobey it: sincerely assenting involves doing something"), then the famous Socratic paradox arises. He expresses it by saying that "it is analytic to say that everyone always does what he thinks he ought to do". "And this, to put Aristotle's objection in modern dress, is not how we use the word 'think'" (LM, p. 169).

Hare's contention here is that the difficulty arises because our criteria in ordinary speech for saying 'he thinks he ought' are extremely elastic. He holds that if a person fails to do something but the omission is accompanied by feelings of guilt etc. we normally say he has not done what he thinks he ought'. This, he says, serves as a criterion for assenting to a moral judgement. This is an addition to the test he puts forth for the criterion of assenting to the moral judgement (i.e. if he assents to the judgement 'ought to do X' he also assents to the command let me do X). And from this he goes on to say that there are degrees of sincere assent not all of which involve actual fulfilment of command.

Horsburgh (1954) further develops the elasticity of these criteria of assent to moral judgements. He argues in support of Hare's view that there are degrees of assent.

His view is:

When I say that A accepts the moral rule, 'one ought to do X', without reserve, I mean (i) that he always obeys this moral rule, and (ii) that this obedience is unconditional in the sense that it is to be explained by reference to the rule. In my view, the weaker criteria are derived from this strict criterion by process of stretching or of dilution of meaning. These criteria shade into one another forming a

descending scale of strictness. There are two additional formulations, however, these are: (1) A accepts a moral rule if (a) he intends to obey it, and (b) his intention to obey it is unconditional. (2) A accepts a moral rule if (a) he wishes to obey it, and (b) his wish to obey it is unconditional (Rpr. in Mortimore, 1971, pp. 126 - 127, emphasis added).

Horsburgh's argument here is that the criterion for acceptance of a moral rule in strict sense involves actual obedience to it. When someone accepts moral rules in strict sense he acts. He says that there is another sense, different from this primary sense or strict sense which is "diluted" or "stretched". The intention to obey and the wish to obey are the diluted forms of the strict sense of actually obeying (i.e. acting). We say that someone has an intention to obey something when he fails to do it and his failure is followed by remorse. In other words, the feeling of remorse consequent upon the failure to do something is a test of the agents having an intention to do the act. Horsburg then concludes from this argument that the more exacting the criterion which a moral agent can satisfy, the higher the degree of assent we attribute to him" (p. 127). An essential part of full assent, according to him, is conformity. "Remorse on the other hand is the only evidence for either the wish or the intention to conform, both of which are less satisfactory than conformity itself" (p. 128). Finally he distinguishes persons of strong character from persons of weak character by saying that the former fully assent to the moral rule and the latter partially assent to the moral rule. Thus he says that the scale

of fullness of assent and strength of character are closely connected.

J.J. Walsh (1963) has pointed out that though Horsburgh stresses upon performance as a test of sincerity, the point remains unestablished. He mentions that 'both Hare and Horsburgh concentrate on the third person case, where one may have reason to suspect sincerity. In case of the first person we hardly suspect our own sincerity and adopt the third person attitude to ourselves, and discover our real belief from our actions. He argues:

... normally a person does not have to discover either his own moral principles or those of another from a survey of relevant actions, because normally a person knows what he believes in a more direct manner, and can find out what another believes by asking him and being told. If it is the intention of Horsburgh at least to assimilate akrasia to hypocrisy or insincerity, his emphasis on performance is intelligible but unestablished. For the normal assumption is that sincerity is the precondition for moral weakness (p. 170).

The other criterion for assenting to a moral rule, namely the agent does not do the action but the omission is accompanied by remorse or feeling of guilt etc., is criticized by Ewing (1959). Ewing points out that this criterion of Hare is based on defining moral attitude in terms of feeling. He says:

How is guilt to be defined? Either we must just say that it is an indefinable but qualitatively recognizable kind of feeling, or we must define it as the feeling we have when we go or recognize that we have gone against our moral decisions, then the moral has been defined in terms of itself (p. 11).

However, Hare's emphasis on the action guiding role of moral judgements implies that if someone assents to a moral judgement, he must also assent to the imperative sentence derivable from it. Thus, on his view, one who professes to assent to the moral judgement but does not assent to the imperative, must have misunderstood the moral judgement (LM, p. 172). One cannot assent to the first and dissent from the second unless he misunderstands one or the other. The 'cannot' here, he says, is a logical 'cannot'. Therefore, according to Hare, it is logically necessary that if someone prescribes to himself that he ought to do X, then he does it, if it is physically and psychologically possible for him to do so.

## II

Let us now proceed to discuss Hare's position expounded in his Freedom and Reason, (henceforth FR) where he propounds a psychological impossibility thesis as a solution to the problem of akrasia (ch. 5). He provides this psychological impossibility thesis to defend his prescriptivism. His standpoint here is that when an agent fails to do what he thinks he 'ought' to do, the use of 'ought' is off-coloured. He contends that in these cases 'ought' is not used with its full-force (i.e. the universal and prescriptive), hence does not really serve as a guide to action.

Before probing the psychological impossibility thesis fully, let us first discuss briefly the nature of 'ought' and see in what kind of situations its use becomes off-coloured, or is not used with its full-force, or is down-graded.

According to Hare, 'ought' imperatives and decisions all imply 'can', because without 'can' a practical question cannot arise. He says that a practical question arises when someone wonders 'what to do', and an ought-question arises when someone wonders 'what he ought to do'. But without the practical question the 'ought' question does not arise. When 'ought' is used with its full-force it implies 'can' because it 'offers help and guidance in answering practical questions' (FR, p. 56). And that is why 'ought' and decisions and imperatives are distinct from ordinary descriptive judgements. Another distinguishing feature of 'ought' is that while an ought judgement is prescriptive and universalizable descriptive judgements are not.

Hare maintains that because of this prescriptive and universalizable nature of value judgements, the moral words possess the property which can roughly be described by the statement "ought implies can". But, "ought implies can" is not true in all cases. As he shows, there are uses of 'ought' where it is consistent with 'cannot'. First, there are social conventions which sometimes press us to do something, and quite often it so happens that though we accept them, we do not act according to them. Secondly we feel guilt or remorse for not

doing certain action as a matter of psychological fact. In the first we fail to do what the social conventions require us to do and in the second we feel guilt or remorse for not doing something, knowing fully well that it is impossible for us to do anything about it. Hare's contention is that 'in these cases 'ought' fails to imply 'can', for it is not used prescriptively'. 'Ought' is so used in these contexts that it is not 'intended to serve as a guide to anybody's actions' (FR, pp. 52 - 53). Cooper (1968, p. 194) has rightly pointed out that 'there is no conceptual difficulty in accomodating moral weakness within a purely social theory of morality'.

Besides these two cases Hare cites a third case in FR, p. 53 where 'I ought but I cannot' is used prescriptively and seeks to guide conduct, but lacks a universal prescription which would apply to the agent's own case. Here though the prescription is used in general terms the agent exempts himself from it, for it is impossible in his case to obey this general prescription. Hare calls this a quasi-universal prescription. The agent here prescribes others to do their action in similar circumstances, but he himself gets away from the prescription. This is a case 'where a corner of the net is as it were lifted to allow the speaker himself to escape'. (FR, p.53) In this case the use of ought is downgraded and not used with its full-force. Because, for Hare, when someone commits himself to a moral judgement, he not only accepts the moral judgement for himself but also

typifies a principle of action which is applicable to anyone in like circumstances.

He conceives of a moral language which is both universal and prescriptive in nature and says that evaluative words of that language have both prescriptive and descriptive use. But this is a holy moral language for the use of angels. On the other hand, human moral language 'has built into its logic all manners or ways of evading the rigour of pure prescriptive universality' (FR, p. 74). In certain cases it is difficult to maintain both prescriptivity and universality of moral judgements. The source of the difficulty for maintaining both universality and prescriptivity, says Hare, is this:

... in setting out to live our life morally we are aspiring to be like angels, which is a formidable undertaking. But angels, unlike human beings, do not find any difficulty in answering such questions, because, having holy wills and no selfish inclinations, they do not ever want to do actions whose maxim they cannot universalize. But we are not angels; and therefore, although the simplest logic for moral language would be that of the universalizable prescriptive, we shy at this rigorous and austere simplicity, and, in our vain struggles to find more comfortable way of speaking, have introduced complexities into the logic of our moral language - vain struggles, because the ideal of pure universal prescriptive moral principles obstinately remains with us, and we are not in the end satisfied with anything which falls short of it (FR, pp. 74 - 75; first emphasis added).

We try to conform our ordinary unholy lives to the moral language which is designed for the use of angels. Since we are not angels, though we accept the above moral principle, thinking of acting on it, in many cases we find it difficult to govern our



conduct according to it. Our selfish interest and unholy will prevent us from acting in accordance with the principle. Hare argues that

When we consider how contrary to our own interests it is for us to act in accordance with the principle, we weaken. While continuing to prescribe that everyone else (or at any rate every-one whose interests do not specially concerns us) should act in accordance with the principle, we do not so prescribe to ourselves (for to do this fully and in earnest would commit us to acting) (FR p. 76).

So, the word 'ought' does not perform the universal prescriptive function here. As he says 'the prescription is not universal and the universality is only descriptive'. Thus, whenever 'ought' is used in this 'quasi-universal' sense, it is said to be used with less than its full force; and in this kind of use of 'ought' the implied universality is not prescriptive but only descriptive. Although like an angelic word 'ought' has both descriptive and prescriptive meanings in some cases it is not used with its full-force. He says, it is 'a Janus-faced word, having both descriptive and prescriptive meaning, but can sometimes look in the direction that suits its user's interest and bury its other face in the sand' (FR, pp. 75 - 76).

The angelic moral language is a kind of ideal language which we do not practise in ordinary life. Our ordinary life is full of instances where there is scope for backsliding. So when we do not do certain things which we think we ought to do, the use of 'ought' becomes 'off-coloured' and we backslide.

Hare states that "the typical case of moral weakness ... is a case of 'ought but cannot'" (FR, p. 80). His explanation for this 'cannot' is that the agent is psychologically incapable of doing the action prescribed by the moral judgement. Hare quotes two instances, that of Medea and St. Paul, to show how psychological inability is involved in the case of moral weakness. Medea tries to resist her love for Jason but fails; and St. Paul expresses his struggle when he says: 'The good which I want to do I fail to do', which indicates his helplessness. In both these cases, contends Hare, the agents are powerless; they are incapable of doing the action. "It is a tautology to say", writes Hare, "that we cannot sincerely assent to a command addressed to ourselves and at the same time not perform it, if now is the occasion for performing it and it is in our (physical and psychological) power to do so" (LM, p. 20). He emphasises this psychological capability in FR, and says: 'Nobody in his senses would maintain that a person who assents to an imperative must (analytically) act on it even when he is unable to do so" (p. 79). So his contention is that when someone fails to act on the imperative that is entailed by the moral judgement, it is not in his/her psychological power to do so. The agent is unable in a deeper sense to do the act and the psychological incapability is said to be like any other physical incapability to do the action (FR, p. 82). When an agent fails to act according to his value judgement, or acts against it, he is overpowered by desire. The recalcitrant desire is so strong that it is not within his power

to control it. However, it is to be noted here that this explanation makes the action unfree in the sense that the agent's irresistible desire forces him to act as he does. And in this case we cannot blame or accuse the agent, for he is in a condition in which he could not have done otherwise.<sup>2</sup> Can this really be a fair explanation of akratic action if the agent is shown to be unfree?

In fact Hare's notion of 'psychological impossibility' involves the application of much too strict criterion of incapability, for he likens the psychological state of the agent incapable of acting in accordance with his own value judgement to the case of a physically hadicaped person. It is certainly wrong to liken the former case with the latter because, whereas in the case of physical incapability the agent knows fully well how much he can do by taking in to account his physical condition, the agent, subject to certain psychological incapability, is not clear about the limits of his incapacity. For there is no definite way of measuring one's psychological incapability. Given this asymmetry between physical and psychological incapability, it surely is unwarranted on Hare's part to judge psychological incapability by the same criterion of strictness which is applied to judge a case of physical incapability.

For example, a person who holds a value judgement that one ought to fight for one's nation when it is under attack by an enemy nation, ought to act if now is the time to fight for his

nation which is in danger of enemy attack. But if his legs are amputated he cannot fight. In such a case we can clearly say that the agent could not do what he thought he ought to do. Now, consider a case of psychological incapability where a person wants to visit a prostitute to have sex and he has the opportunity to do so. But he knows that committing the act will damage his social honour. He also has the moral belief that visiting the brothel is bad and his so acting will encourage the institution of prostitution. He disapproves of prostitution as an institution. So he judges that it is better not to consummate the sexual desire in that way. But owing to his strong passion for sex he commits the act and later feels guilty about it. By what criterion can we now establish that it is not in his power to refrain from the action or that he is psychologically incapable of doing otherwise?

In the example of physical incapability it is very clear that no effort is made by the agent according to the moral judgement he makes before his legs are amputated and no remorse results from his failure to perform the action because the agent knows that he is not capable of doing the desired action. Thus he is not subject to any moral conflict; he may simply be sad about his own plight. On the other hand in the example of psychological incapability the agent at first suffers from a moral conflict and later becomes remorseful about his own action. And his remorse is intelligible only when we assume that doing

what he thought he ought to do was within his power. This is what makes his action typically akratic. The agent here is fully aware of his value judgement and his commitment to it, but yields to the countervailing desire, not because the desire is irresistible, but because he does not make sufficient effort to fight the recalcitrant desire. What makes the akratic action in this example typically moral is the fact that given sufficient effort the akrates could have resisted the recalcitrant desire and acted otherwise.

In this connection let us now consider some recent discussions on the psychological impossibility thesis and see whether it is within the power of the agent to resist the recalcitrant desire or not.

Watson (1977) argues that when someone acts contrary to what he judges best then he is "unable to resist" the contrary desire. According to him, the possible common explanations for the failure are, (i) the agent chooses not to exercise the capacity to resist the desire; (ii) his effort to resist is culpably insufficient. But he considers both these explanations inadequate (p. 336).

The first explanation collapses because as Watson says, (a) "the agent's failure to resist her desire to drink is a failure to implement her choice not to drink. To choose not to implement this choice would be to change her original judgement, and the case would no longer be a case of failure to implement

judgement". (b) "To explain (the) failure (by giving an account of choice) this way ... would result in the moral assimilation of weak case to the reckless case" (pp. 336 - 337).

The second explanation that the agent makes insufficient effort to resist the desire collapses because the explanation cannot be that the agent misjudges the amount of effort required. Watson claims that "even if misjudgement were involved, that would be a different fault from weakness of will" (p. 338). For the agent fails to resist the recalcitrant desire though he is able to resist it, in that desire to drink may generate desire not to make this effort ... and these may be irresistably strong" (p. 338).

In a careful study of Watson's view on this problem Alfred Mele (1987) tries to refute the former's contention that the agent's failure to resist the recalcitrant desire cannot be explained by the fact that the agent "misjudges the amount of effort required". For, as Mele thinks, there are certain cases of akratic action which involve non-judgement of the amount of effort required to resist the recalcitrant desire.<sup>3</sup> He argues that both "non-judgement and misjudgement of the amount or kind of effort required to resist (successfully) a pertinent desire quite properly enter into explanation of akratic action" (1987, p. 27).

In this regard he distinguishes between two different kinds

of resistance, namely 'skilled' and 'brute' resistance (1987, p. 26). The agent exerceizes skilled resistance by adopting strategies which will motivate him more to perform the action he judges best or will try to diminish his motivation for doing the action contrary to his better judgement. Take for example (our) agent who goes to a prostitute inspite of his better judgement in favour of not consumating that desire. He could have resisted his desire by adopting the strategy of skillful resistance. For instance, he could have avoided the act by taking a different path which is away from the red-light area. Or he could have seriously reflected on the negative aspect of the action.

Brute resistance is described by Mele in the following way:

To make an effort of brute resistance in support of one's doing X is to form or retain an intention to do X in order to bring it about that, rather than succumbing to temptation, one X-s, that is, it is with further intention that the agent exercising brute resistance forms or retains the intention to do X - with the intention, namely, of bringing it about that he X-s rather than Y-s. This account captures the intentional element, therefore the element of effort, involved in brute resistance. The brute resister intentionally forms or retains the intention to X. And anything intentionally done plainly requires some effort (1987, p. 26).

By drawing the distinction between these two kinds of resistance Mele refutes Watson's view. Explanation of akratic action depends upon non-judgement or misjudgement of this type because the agent is sometimes mistaken about the amount or kind of effort required (1987, p. 27).

Mele further argues against watson that the agent's choosing

not to resist the recalcitrant desire is a case of his/her changing the original judgement, with the consequence that the resulting action is no longer a case of failure to implement the judgement.

His polemic is that to choose not to implement a choice would be to abandon the choice. In this case the agent fails to resist because he chooses not to exercise his normal capacity of self-control to support his better judgement. Thus when the agent chooses not to exercise his self-control he does not change his better judgement. Rather, the agent may self-indulgently act against what he judges best. Suppose the person who goes to the prostitute has sufficient reason for refraining from the act and also knows how to resist the desire, (i.e. if he can meet his friend who stays just next to his house and expresses his desire, then he will prevent him from doing the action. And on earlier occasions he has succeeded in applying this strategy), yet he does the action.

Mele says that the agent here acts freely, for he decides to do the action against his better judgement.

Mele's explanation for the action done akratically is based on the motivational condition of the agent. In his words, 'at the time of action, the balance of (our) motivations lies on the side of the akratic action' (1987, p. 29). The agent does not make much resistance because he withdraws the motivational force



from his best judgement and without any compulsion allows his desire for doing the contrary action prevail. The desire is resistible, the agent could have resisted the desire had he adopted a different mode of resistance.

Furthermore, Hare's account reads as though the agent realises, when the appropriate time comes, that he is not capable of doing the action. And this will relieve him of the freedom of acting according to the prescription. In such cases 'ought' does not imply 'can'. But does this follow from a true description of the psychological state of the agent who accepts a moral judgement?

One might naturally ask the question about the psychological state of the agent who accepts a moral principle. Even from Hare's own account of moral action it is clear that if an agent, while accepting the moral judgement, has not envisaged the capacity of acting according to that judgement, then that agent has taken upon himself the responsibility of acting according to it as and when the occasion arises. The very fact that the agent makes a prescription to himself shows that he has the capacity to do the prescribed action.

The point we want to emphasize here is that acceptance of moral judgement (which we call the normal acceptance of a moral principle) involves a psychological state of acknowledging one's own power to realise it in action. And if he finds himself helpless to carry out the action required by the principle it is

because he also has a temporary but strong countervailing desire. But moral principles are permanent principles for guiding our action. So we cannot 'reject a moral principle just because we have an opposing desire which is temporarily stronger' (Cooper, 1968, Rpr. in Mortimore 1971, p. 198).

Our contention here is that the temporary strong desire overpowers the permanent moral principle. But from this one cannot rule out, *a la* Hare, the problem of akrasia by describing it as a case of psychological incapability. For we have found that psychological incapability, unlike physical incapability, is compatible with the agent's overcoming the so-called recalcitrant desire. It is on this ground of the asymmetry between psychological and physical incapability that we contend that Hare has explained away the problem of akrasia in a wrong-headed way.

## NOTES

1. In Moral Thinking (1981, p. 53) Hare adds another distinguishing property to the definition of moral. He says these two properties universalizability and prescriptivity are not sufficient to define the class of moral judgements. 'In order to distinguish moral judgements within a larger genus, a differentia is required'. He names this distinguishing property as overridingness. The context in which Hare requires this third property is the content of moral conflicts where someone faces the difficulty to settle between two conflicting duties. However, our concern here is with the problem of the weakness of will, which deals with a situation in which someone who knows he ought not to be doing something, albeit, does it. These two are totally different cases. So, for the present study we do not take the third property into account.
2. Luckes (1965), argues that if the agent is not capable of controlling his desire then Hare is advancing a 'crude form of determinism' (Rpr. in Mortimore, 1971, p. 152). Mathews (1966), goes on to say that 'if it is literally true that the agent was powerless, could not help himself, could not do anything else, then however much he blames himself, we would be as little inclined to reproach or reprove as we would in a clear case of kleptomania' (Rpr. in Mortimore,

1971, p. 170). Cooper (1971) calls it a 'epithumatic determinism', the theory that human action is determined by strongest desire. He argues that this theory 'is absurdly simple-minded, since it supposes (i) that desires are the only determinants of human behaviour and; (ii) that the strength or intensity of these desires are the only relevant determining factors. He claims that both these suppositions are false. He says there is always a sense in which the weak could have withstood the temptation (p. 219).

3. He gives the following example in support of his argument:

Alex's friend, Bob, has proposed that they affirm their friendship by becoming blood brothers, since Alex is about to go away to prep school. The ceremony involves the boys' cutting their own right palms with a sharp new pocket knife and then shaking hands so that their blood will run together. Alex is averse to drawing blood from himself; but he carefully weighs his reasons for accepting the proposal against his competing reasons (including, of course, the aversion just mentioned) and judges that all things considered, it would be best to accept the proposal and to perform the ceremony at once. He decides, accordingly, to cut his hand with the knife here and now, thus forming an intention to do so; and, without considering that he may find the task difficult to accomplish, he grasps the knife and moves it toward the right palm with the intention of drawing blood. However, as he sees the knife come very close to his skin he stops (intentionally), defeated by the above mentioned aversion. (Upset at himself for having failed, Alex resolves to try again, this time without looking. The second attempt is successful) (Mele, 1987, p. 25).

## CHAPTER - V

### FAILURE OF REASON: THE DAVIDSONIÁN ACCOUNT

#### I

Davidson's treatment of the problem of akrasia brings about a major shift in the discussion of the nature of the problem. He deviates from tradition by removing the problem from the arena of morality. His contention is that in case of akratic failure morality does not necessarily enter into the picture. He divides his ancestors into two groups. The theme for one group, he says, is that desire distracts us from the good, or forces us to the bad, and for the other incontinent action always favours the beastly selfish passion over the call of duty and morality ("How is Weakness of the Will Possible?", henceforth HWWP, in Essays on Actions and Events, 1980 henceforth EAE, p. 29). Davidson suggests that it is not always the case that passion wins and overshadows the agent's better judgement; and duty or morality loses. He gives the example of a man who, while comfortably lying down on the bed after a tiring day, suddenly remembers he has not brushed his teeth. Though he judges, everything considered, it would be better not to get up to brush his teeth, because it will spoil his sleep, he gets up and brushes his teeth. In this case if the agent considers that it is his duty to brush his teeth, then morality or duty is not the loser at all, it is rather the winner. He says that 'the way of

approaching the problem of incontinence ... is to dwell on the cases where morality simply does not enter the picture as one of the contestants for your favour - or if it does, it is on the wrong side' (EAE, p. 30).

His approach is embedded in his theory of intentional action. In "Actions, Reasons and Causes", (in EAE, pp. 3 - 19 henceforth ARC) he proposes the thesis that an action is intentional when the agent has a reason for doing it and the reason for which he acts is a cause of that action. The performance of an intentional action, he says, depends upon the agent's pro-attitudes and belief. According to him, pro-attitudes 'include desire, wanting, urges, prompting and great variety of moral views, aesthetic principles, economic prejudices, social conventions, and public and private goals and values in so far as these can be interpreted as attitude of an agent directed toward actions of a certain kind' (EAE, p. 4). This pair (desire and other pro-attitudes and belief) constitutes a reason for which the agent performs the action. Davidson calls this the primary reason for which his action is performed.

A necessary condition for primary reasons, he says, is:

C1. R is a primary reason why an agent performed the action A under the description d only if R consists of a pro-attitude of the agent towards actions with a certain property, and a belief of the agent that A, under the description d, has that property (EAE, p. 5).

He provides this pair to explain intentional action. To know the primary reason for which an agent acts is to know an intention

with which he does the action (EAE, p. 7). And he maintains that the primary reason for an action is its cause (EAE, p. 4). He further holds that there is some kind of logical relation between the agent's reason and his action. He tries to establish this logical relation by using the notion of practical syllogism. The reason for which an agent acts gives him the premisses on the basis of which he reaches a conclusion that 'the action is desirable (reasonable, worth doing etc.)' (EAE, p. 9 f.n. 4). This, he says, follows deductively from the pair of belief and desire which constitutes the premisses. Davidson says that the Aristotelian dictum that the conclusion of a practical syllogism is an action is cogent with his view. Once the agent has the desire and the belief that a certain action will satisfy it, he acts straightaway. So he asserts two theses here: (i) reasons are causes of the actions (which he dubs as a causal theory of action); and (ii) the reasons for an action (i.e. the pro-attitudes and belief which constitute the premisses) are deductively related to the conclusion that the action is desirable.

The occurrence of the akratic action challenges the causal theories of action. Davidson observes:

Causal theories of action are challenged by intentional actions that are contrary to the actor's best judgement. For if reasons are causes, it is natural to suppose that the strongest reasons are the strongest causes. I defend the causal view ... by arguing that a reason that is causally strongest need not be reason deemed by the actor to provide the strongest best grounds for acting (EAE, p. xii).

Davidson proposes that the occurrence of incontinent action does not conflict with the causal theory of action (i.e. reasons are causes of actions). In case of incontinent action the agent does not act for the reasons he considers to be the best, but acts for a reason all the same. And the reason for which he acts certainly is the cause of his action. Here Davidson's contention is that the incontinent agent faces the conflicting situation where he holds one course of action to be better (for a reason) and does something else (also for a reason) (EAE, p. 34).

What is special about the problem of akrasia is that the agent, instead of acting with what he considers to be better reasons to act, acts with certain other reasons. In course of this chapter we will discuss what happens when an agent fails to act on the reasons which he considers to be best.

The second assertion, which he makes in ARC, poses great difficulty for the explanation of incontinent action. He goes against this deductive model in HWWP. He says:

I [now] come out against the view, espoused earlier, that the propositional expressions of the reasons for an action are deductively related to the propositions that correspond to the action as explained by those reasons (EAE, p. xii).

Davidson's contention is that if we consider the reasons which provide the premisses on the basis of which we judge a certain action to be best as a deductive reasoning, then in case of akrasia, the agent cannot derive a contradictory conclusion from the premisses which are all true. For in case of akratic action



the agent acts contrary to his best judgement. Davidson says that the reasons (desire and belief) by which we arrive at the judgement that a certain action is best do not follow from it by ordinary logic. This leads him to draw a distinction between conditional prima facie judgement about action and unconditional judgement or judgement sans phrase about action (HWWP). He says that incontinent actions occur only when the agent holds a conditional or prima facie judgement. This judgement is conditioned by all the considerations which the agent thinks relevant in performing that action. Davidson identifies an unconditional evaluative judgement about action with an intention and maintains that we never act against our unconditional judgement. The above distinction is important for Davidson, for his solution to the problem of the (apparent) contradiction in an akratic action draws heavily on it.

In HWWP he formulates three principles, the stating of which focuses the apparent contradiction in an incontinent action:

- P 1 - If an agent wants to do X more than he wants to do Y and he believes himself free to do either X or Y, then he will intentionally do X if he does either X or Y intentionally.
- P 2 - If an agent judges that it would be better to do X than to do Y then he wants to do X more than he wants to do Y.
- P 3 - There are incontinent actions. (EAE, p. 23)

with an unconditional judgement or judgement sans phrase.  
should be borne in mind that for Davidson an unconditional judgement is equivalent to an intention. When an agent<sup>\*</sup> acts intentionally, i.e. with an all-out unconditional judgement there is no distinction between his forming an intention and his action. Actions always correspond to unconditional judgements. But in case of conditional judgement an agent fails to act in accordance with it. Because '... there is no principle of logic or psychological law that says we must trim our unconditional judgements of what is best to our best judgements, someone can judge, and act, contrary to his own best judgement' (Davidson 1985a p. 201). So, he associates the occurrence of incontinent action with an all-things-considered or a prima facie judgement. Our reasoning sometimes stops at the 'all-things-considered' or conditional judgement that X is better than Y; it fails to arrive at the unconditional judgement that X is better than Y.

Let us now discuss in detail the nature of these two kinds of judgements and see how Davidson tries to resolve the apparent contradiction involved in his principles (which gives the impression that P 1 - P 3 form an inconsistent triad) by showing the contrast between these two types of judgements.

## II

The crux of Davidson's discussion of the occurrence of incontinent action (which is his P 3 ) is based on the

conditional or 'all-things-considered' judgement. He says the reasoning involved in conditional evaluative judgement does not have the form of a universalized quantified conditional from which we can detach conclusion about what is desirable or better. It is rather like a probabilistic or relativised reasoning. The judgement by which the incontinent agent is guided is a prima facie judgement. The similarity between prima facie judgement and reasoning from the probabilistic evidence is worth noting. Hempel (1965) has shown the impossibility of detaching the conclusion from the probabilistic evidence as in the following:

- (a) If the barometer is falling, it almost certainly will rain.

The barometer is falling.

It almost certainly will rain.

Since if we grant this reasoning the status of deductive reasoning, we are equally justified in arguing:

- (b) Red skies at the night, it almost certainly won't rain.

The sky is red tonight.

It almost certainly won't rain.

Expressed in symbols, the major premiss of (a) has the following form,  $\text{Pr} (Rx, Fx)$ , given that we replace the connective 'almost certainly' by 'probabilizes'. The symbols read as "That the barometer falls probabilizes that it will rain". Space-time or rain are the variables over which  $x$  ranges.

Now, following Hempel, Davidson claims that a prima facie judgement is analogous to reasoning from probabilistic evidence where 'prima facie' functions as a sentential operator between two sentences. Prima facie judgement is based on the total evidence available to the agent. The logical form of the conditional 'all-things-considered' judgement is Pf (a is better than b, e), where e is all the relevant considerations known to us and a and b stand for possible actions. The akrates holds the conditional judgement that Pf (a is better than b, e), i.e. relative to all the available evidence it would be better to do a than to do b. 'All-things-considered' better judgement though rationally justified insulated from action does not have the power to move the agent to action. Davidson writes:

Intentional action . . . is geared directly to unconditional judgements like 'It would be better to do a than to do b'. Reasoning that stops at conditional judgements . . . is practical only in its subject, not in its issue (EAE, P. 39).

So, according to Davidson the all things considered (i.e. prima facie) better judgement does not issue in an intention (for Davidson unconditional better judgement are intentions). It simply says that the action is desirable. It does not have the power to ensure an action without unconditional judgement. In "Intending" he writes:

Prima facie judgements cannot be directly associated with actions, for it is not reasonable to perform an action merely because it has a desirable characteristic. It is a reason for acting that the action is believed to have some desirable characteristic, but the fact that the action is

performed represents a further judgement that the desirable characteristic was enough to act on - other considerations did not outweigh it. The judgement that corresponds to, or perhaps is identical with the action cannot, therefore, be a prima facie judgement; it must be an all-out or unconditional judgement which, if we were to express it in words, would have a form like 'This action is desirable' (EAE, p. 98).

What happens in Davidson's view is that akrasia occurs when the agent holds the judgement 'a is better than b all things considered' and the reasoning just stops there; and the akrates fails to arrive at the corresponding unconditional judgement or judgement simpliciter 'a is better than b' (which is his P 2).

To quote him:

I am committed to the view that an agent is incontinent only if he fails to reason from a conditional 'all things considered' judgement that a certain course of action is best to the unconditional conclusion that that course of action is best (Davidson, 1985a, p. 206).

Davidson argues that this 'all things considered' judgement (a is better than b, e) fails to form the unconditional judgement that a is the best. Instead the akrates forms an unconditional judgement that b is better than a and acts accordingly, i.e. he straightaway does b. Davidson says that there is no logical difficulty involved here. For the unconditional judgement that b is better than a cannot be incompatible with the 'all things considered' or 'if' judgement. P 1 - P 3 do not conflict with each other. For P 3 is concerned with pf judgement and P 1 - P 2 with judgement sans phrase.

However, in HWWP Davidson admits that 'a is better than b, all-things-considered' entails 'a is better than b' and he claims that the akrates holds the former but not the latter. But he says that 'we do not want to explain incontinence as a simple logical blunder'.

The 'all-things-considered' judgement according to him includes "things known, believed or held by the agent, the sum of his relevant principles, opinion, attitude and desire" (EAE, p. 40). Grice and Baker (1985, p. 33) have pointed out that it (all things considered) might mean either (i) relative to everything so far been considered or (ii) relative to everything which should be considered. They are of the opinion that the natural interpretation of it seems to be the second one because the agent ought to gather all relevant informations before he sets out for action. But Davidson intends the first, i.e. relative to everything so far been considered. (See Grice and Baker, (1985) for an elaborate analysis of the 'all-things-considered' judgement).

Maintaining his position that an agent is incontinent if he intentionally does one thing while judging that an available alternative is better, Davidson writes:

... he does x for a reason r, but he has a reason r' that includes r and more, on the basis of which he judges some alternative y to be better than x. Of course it might also have been incontinent of him to have done y, since he may have had better reason still for performing some third action z. Following this line we might say that an action x

is continent if  $x$  is done for a reason  $r$ , and there is no reason  $r'$  (that includes  $r$ ) on the basis of which the agent judges some action better than  $x$  (EAE, p. 40).

This characterization of incontinent action implies that without 'the idea of agent's total wisdom' we can account for incontinent action. So Davidson says that 'every judgement is made in the light of all the reasons ... that it is made in the presence of, and is conditioned by, that totality (EAE, p. 40). The akrates holds, all things considered,  $a$  is better than  $b$ , but acts with a perverse unconditional judgement that  $b$  is better than  $a$ . Davidson points out that the same reasons on the basis of which we arrive at a judgement  $p$  may be the cause of our rejecting  $p$ . So he says:

If  $r$  is someone's reason for holding that  $p$  then his holding that  $r$  must be, I think a cause of his holding that  $p$ . But, and this is what is crucial here, his holding that  $r$  may cause his holding that  $p$  without  $r$  being his reason; indeed the agent may think  $r$  is a reason to reject  $p$  (EAE, p. 41).

Since Davidson has not provided concrete examples it is not clear under what interpretation this is possible.

Thus according to Davidson's view the akrates does not hold logically contradictory beliefs. His failure is not necessarily a moral failure. What is wrong is that the incontinent man acts, and judges irrationally. A rational agent accepts the principle of continence which says that if an agent believes all the relevant reasons to support a certain course of action then he should pursue that course of action. The principle of continence

is a principle which is not a part of the logic of inductive reasoning. But it is a directive or a maxim which a rational man will accept. But Davidson contends that 'what is<sup>1</sup> hard is to acquire the virtue of continence, to make the principle of continence our own' (EAE, p. 41).

At the end of HWWP Davidson asks the question: what is the agent's reason for doing *b* despite his belief that all things considered it would be better to do *a*? The answer is that the agent has no reason. He says the agent obviously has a reason for doing *b* but what he lacks is a reason for letting his better reason for not doing *b* prevail. Davidson holds that it is<sup>2</sup> difficult to give a rational explanation to incontinent action.

He writes:

...in the case of incontinence, the attempt to read reason into behaviour is necessarily subject to a degree of frustration. What is special in incontinence is that the actor cannot understand himself: he recognises, in his own behaviour, something essentially surd. (EAE, p. 42).

But in his later article "Paradoxes of irrationality" (1982a) Davidson tries to explain the phenomenon of irrational action. Let us now discuss Davidson's later view .

### III

Noting the fact that the akrates finds ' something essentially surd' in this own intentional action, Davidson makes a fresh attempt in his "Paradoxes of Irrationality" (1982a ), to



scrutinize and explain this irrational phenomenon. In this new attempt he holds the view that the akrates 'goes against his second order principle that he ought to act on what he holds best, everything considered' (1982a, p. 297, cf. his principle of continence, EAE, p. 41). But then the agent is accused of internal inconsistency because despite accepting the second order principle he fails to act accordingly. He formulates a psychological model which shows how the internal inconsistency attributed to the akratic agent can occur within a single mind.

Davidson admits that there is a desire that motivates the akratic agent to do something contrary to what his second order principle prescribes. It is by referring to this desire that we can explain why he does the action against his better judgement; and it is the presence of this desire that provides the reason why the agent acts against the principle, or why he ignores the very principle he holds. However, while this desire is a reason for acting contrary to the principle, 'it is not a reason against the principle itself' (p.297). Thus, for Davidson, the action which the agent does akratically can be explained by giving a normal 'reason explanation' by citing the desire which motivates him to do it. So he maintains that 'it is because he has a reason for what he does that we can give the intention with which he acted. And like all intentional actions, his action can be explained, by referring to the beliefs and desires that caused it' (p. 296).

The desire which prompts him to do the akratic action is a cause of, but not a reason for, his failure to intend to act in accordance with his better judgement. So the 'desire here operates as a 'non-rational causality'. Davidson's claim essentially is that 'in case of irrationality ... there is a mental cause that is not a reason for what it causes' (p. 298). His purpose here is to explain how one mental event can cause another mental event without being a reason for it.

To explain this he requires a mental partitioning thesis which assumes that the mind can be 'partitioned into quasi-independent structures' (p. 300), which then can be said to be related to one another in the relation of mental causality. Now Davidson wants to say that where mental causality between the two semi-autonomous parts of the mind does not constitute a reason-relation, the 'breakdown of reason-relation defines the boundary of a subdivision' (p. 304).

He further asserts that 'only by partitioning the mind does it seem possible to explain how a thought or impulse can cause another to which it bears no rational relation' (p. 303). His way of showing this is ingenious. First he cites the non-puzzling cases where a mental event causes another mental event without the one being a reason for the other. This is when cause and effect occur in different minds, or in interpersonal relations. He gives the following example:

Wishing to have you enter my garden, I grow a beautiful

flower there. You crave a look at my flower and enter my garden. My desire caused your craving and action, but my desire was not a reason for your craving nor a reason on which you acted (p. 300).

Davidson then maps this pattern of non-rational mental causality on to a single mind and claims that 'certain mental events take on the character of mere causes relative to some other mental events in the same mind' (p. 304). His contention is that we must allow some degree of autonomy to parts of the mind if we are to explain how internal inconsistency within a single mind is possible.

However, the mental partitioning thesis does not correspond to a battle between reason and passion. There is, according to Davidson, no such antinomy between the semi-autonomous mental parts. Rather, the parts are depicted as elements of an organized whole, within which there is a fair degree of consistency and where the elements operate on one another in the modality of non-rational causality (p. 301). This Davidson claims to be a modest Freudian theory of irrationality. The Freudian theory essentially consists of the following three theses: (1) that the mind is partitioned into a number of semi-independent structures, such as thoughts, desires and memories; (2) that such subdivisions can combine, as in intentional action, to cause further events in the mind or outside; (3) that some mental dispositions, attitudes and events must be viewed on the model of physical dispositions and forces that they affect, or are affected by other substructures of the mind. Thesis (3)

essentially means that there are some mental events which can be mere causes of some other mental events in the same mind.

Davidson's adoption of this freudian model for the explanation of akrasia rules out the thesis that in case of akrasia desire overpowers the better judgement. Rather, he narrates the whole episode of akrasia to divide the mind into two or more semi-autonomous structures. He says that 'one (part of the mind ) finds a certain course of action to be best and another that prompts another course of action' (p.300).

This can now be compared with his earlier view enunciated in HWWP where he refers to a disharmony between the all-things-considered judgement and the unconditional judgement. The agent makes an all-things considered judgement that a is better than b and then joins it with a perverse unconditional judgement that b is better than a (instead of joining it with the judgement simpliciter that a is better than b). Now, given the freudian model delineated above, it becomes possible to explain the (non-rational) relation of the all things-considered judgement ("a is better than b") with the perverse unconditional judgement ("b is better than a") , which is plainly inconsistent with the former, as the relation between two semi-autonomous divisions of a single mind. For only by partitioning the mind in some such way can it be explained how one thought, namely an all-things-considered judgement can cause another, namely an (perverse) unconditional judgement to which it does not bear any rational relation. In

the case of akrasia the latter judgement somehow manages to dominate its rival (former judgement), such that the cogency and plausibility of the former judgement becomes ineficacious in leading the agent to do the act he judges to be the best. The perverse unconditional judgement becomes effective in moving the agent to act contrary to what his sober judgement recommends.

Here we want to point out that the explanation can be given in terms of the description of the psychological state of the agent. Looking at the psychological state of the agent for an explanation naturally brings in the concept of motivation. Though Davidson explains the irrational action by resorting to a partitioning theory of mind it will not amount to a rejection of an explanation in terms of motivational strength. If one admits that the overpowering desire which prompts the agent to perform an akratic action is a cause of but not a reason for his failure to intend to act according to his best judgement then one is committed to a theory of motivational strength. Davidson himself admits that the desire operates, in case of akrasia, as 'a non-rational causality'. When you fill in the details by a Freudian theory you have an explanation in terms of a partitioning theory of mind. It is not surprising that the theory of motivational strength can still be compatible with the divided mind thesis. Because once an agent has accepted the second order principle, such as the principle of continence, but still fails to apply it in his action then the question of his lacking motivational

strength to perform the action arises. It may be that the agent lacks the motivational strength to perform the action; and the question why this happens might point to the way the mind is structured.

In the next section we will discuss the account of David Pears who also holds a similar view that akrasia is an instance of irrational action.

#### IV

Although, like Davidson, Pears holds the view that akratic actions are irrational actions, his explanation of the irrationality of akrasia is different from that of Davidson. Pears (1982c) characterizes this irrationality as "thought-misfit irrationality". His idea is that one's thought ought to control his action and akrasia occurs when the thought fails to regulate the subsequent action. The action is irrational because it does not harmonize with the preparatory thought. He considers this preparatory thought as an equipment, because the agent sets out for action by being equipped with a certain thought. So for him akrasia is "equipment relative". It is only by referring to this equipment that we judge a certain action to be akratic or not akratic (p. 34).

His argument here is different from Davidson's because, in Davidson's approach akrasia is possible when the agent makes a

mistake inside his reasoning. The akratic action according to Davidson is an action against a qualified judgement, that all-things-considered it will be better to do *a* than *b*. 'The reasoning here is incomplete, for the agent fails to issue an unqualified unconditional judgement that *a* is better than *b*. (For Davidson only an unconditional judgement can result in an intentional action) The agent goes wrong here because he makes an unconditional judgement that *b* is better than *a*. In Davidson's view, so far as the all-things-considered judgement is concerned, the agent's reasoning is correct, because he arrives at that judgement first by considering the relevant circumstances; and after that he goes wrong because he makes the perverse value judgement that *b* is better than *a*. So, Davidson says that the agent's move from the qualified all-things considered judgement to the perverse unqualified unconditional judgement is irrational, but the agent thereby does not contradict himself.

But Pears argues for the possibility of akrasia where the fault is located outside the agent's reasoning i.e. non-conformity between the last line of his argument (reasoning) and his action. He holds that the agent acts against his value-judgement with the full knowledge that it is wrong. And the fault is located immediately before the action. His contention is that an akratic action is possible even when the agent's reasoning is complete and he arrives at a final value judgement that it would be best to do a particular action *a* now, yet does

another action b. He calls this type of akrasia "brazen akrasia" (1982c, p. 35). Or "conscious last ditch akrasia" where irrationality occurs between the agent's concluding singular value judgement and action (1984, p. 135).

Further he recognizes that 'akrasia is most difficult when the fault is located immediately before the action and the wish operates openly, the person himself knows that his move is irrational and the fault is intrinsic to the move' (1982c, p. 35). This, according to him, is underivative brazen akrasia. Davidson denies the possibility of this sort of akratic action. Because, for Davidson it is not possible to locate the fault between the agent's final value judgement and the action. His argument for this is that if the fault is located between the last line of the agent's reasoning and his action then the agent will consciously contradict himself. But for him the agent makes an irrational move without contradicting himself because there is a gap between the relevant consideration available to the agent and all the considerations that there are. Pears says that by taking into consideration this gap the Davidsonian account explains some cases of brazen akrasia. This latitude provides ground for an irrational move to the agent.

Pears argues that underivative brazen akrasia without latitude is possible. And he also maintains the thesis that there is no self-contradiction involved in the underivative brazen akrasia. He offers a different model to explain the



irrationality.

According to Pears, both Socrates and Davidson 'claim that there is a necessary "backward connection" running from doing an action intentionally and avoidably to judging it best to do it'. He distinguishes this "backward connection" from "forward connection", 'which runs from judging best to doing' (1982c, pp. 40 - 41). He says there are two intermediate links, i.e. doing an action intentionally and avoidably necessarily involves (i) waiting to do it most; and (ii) judging it best.

Pears contends that "backward connection" is not necessary to refute underivative brazen akrasia or anxious last ditch akrasia. His argument is that the connection from (i) waiting to do it most to (ii) judging it best fails because:

... many of a persons intentional, avoidable actions on an ordinary day are routine. Such actions do not need the push of wanting most to get them done. A human agent is not an inert system always needing the push of wanting most.

The second link fares no better. For even when an intentional avoidable action is wanted most, it need not be judged best. An agent can do something because he wants to do it most without setting any value either on the particular thing that he does or on the general policy of doing what he most wants to do (1982c, p. 41).

Thus Pears refutes the Davidsonian argument that there is a link between wanting to do it most and judging it best. If the "backward connection" is required because it provides the support of a value judgement to the perverse action (i.e. *b* is better than *a*), then any want (desire) will get its support from the

value judgement and there will always be a positive value judgement in support of any intentional non-compulsive action (Pears, 1984, p. 191).

Let us now discuss Pears' explanation of the irrationality involved in underivative brazen akrasia. He begins his discussion by giving a comparison between the structure of underivative brazen akrasia without latitude, and a non-latitude underivative wishful thinking. The major distinction between the wishful thinker and the akratic agent according to him is that, whereas the wishful thinker begins with a chain of thought and keeps adding another thought to it, the akratic agent adds an action to his sequence of thought (1982c, p. 44). Pears says that there is a dividing line between the world of thought and the real world. The wishful thinker, he adds, remains in one side of the world (i.e. the world of thought only) because he sees that it could not possibly fit anything on the other side of the line (i.e. the real world); so the wishful thinker fails to complete his thought. The akratic agent, on the other hand, has one foot in each of the two worlds. So the akrates cannot even ask himself whether it could fit anything on the other side of the line because for the akrates there is "no other side of the line" and his construction is also not complete. The akrates' move here is irrational, but the explanation of this irrationality is different because the obstacles to completion is different (1982c, 44). The irrationality involved here is the

irrationality of unruliness, not irrationality of self-contradiction.

In non-latitude underivative brazen akrasia the agent fails to ensure that his action fits his value judgement. To support this point Pears shows the similarity between unruliness in action and the perversity of false factual statement. The false factual statement fails to ensure that it fits an evident fact. There are two different concepts of 'fitting' involved here. In the latter case the fitting is being true, but in the former case the fitting is conformity to the value-judgement or being guided by the value judgement. In spite of this difference in fitting, Pears says that in both the cases there is a similarity which he calls the language-reality misfits (1982c, p. 45).

Pears points out the fact that it is not intellectually difficult to avoid the fault but only emotionally difficult. The underderivatively brazenly akratic agent understands and remembers his value-judgement. So he is intellectually the most capable person to ensure that his action fits his value-judgement. The misfit occurs because the agent is guided by a wrong desire and Pears asserts that mere desire has the capacity to produce an intentional avoidable action. The desire coolly discards the intellectual obstacle for its own fulfillment. The irrationality is motivated by the desire and then fulfilled by the action. Pears calls this type of irrationality as "motivated irrationality" (1984, p. 19).

## V

Before we close this chapter we want to mention some of the criticisms raised against the solution offered by Davidson to the problem of akrasia.

As we have seen in HWWP Davidson shows that the akrates does not hold logically contradictory beliefs. That there are incontinent actions (P 3) together with two other principles (P 1 and P 2) form a triad that seems to be consistent. Davidson attempts to show that p 1 to p 3 do not contradict one another. He tries to establish this thesis without giving up any of the principles (p 1 to p 3). His argument hinges on the insertion of a conditional phrase 'all-things-considered' in the description of akratic action (D). His solution to the problem is based on this all-things-considered conditional judgement which he distinguishes from an unconditional judgement. (And he argues that only an unconditional judgement has the power to produce an action). The akrates acts against his conditional judgement that it is better for him to do a particular action, but he does not act against his unconditional judgement. Davidson asserts that no one acts against his unconditional value-judgement (i.e. P 2).

This contention of Davidson is questioned by several commentators. All his commentators claim that akrasia is possible even when an agent holds an unconditional evaluative judgement, and they try to show that his P 2 (i.e. if an agent

judges x is better than y then he wants to do x more than y) is false. These commentators argue that many a time our evaluative judgement does not tally with our motivation. Our evaluative judgement prescribes something but we do something else.

Watson (1977) asks the question: 'Is there not good reason to think that people act contrary to their unqualified or unconditional judgements, as there is to think that people act contrary to their all-things-considered judgements?' Davidson's denial that the akrates acts against an unqualified or unconditional judgement is based on his P 1 and P 2. Watson objects that the key phrases in these two principles do not have an univocal interpretation which will render them as true or even plausible (p. 321). He distinguishes between two senses of "wants more", an evaluative sense and a motivational sense. In the evaluative sense, if an agent wants to do x more than he wants to do y, then he prefers x to y or ranks x higher than y on some scale of value or "desirability matrix". In motivational sense, if an agent wants to do x more than y then he is more strongly motivated to do x than y. From this he concludes that 'P 2 may be true if understood in the language of evaluation, but false if understood in the language of motivation; where as P 1 is true if understood in the in the language of motivation but false if understood in the language of evaluation' (p. 321).

But the Davidsonian account asserts that motivation always conforms to the better judgement of the agent. This view is more

like the Socratic view which denies the problem of akrasia. But common experience shows that akratic action is possible when an agent judges simply that it would be better to do *a* than *b* (see Audi, 1979, p. 191ff). Both Davidson's and Socrates' views contradict our day to day common facts of life, for they have not taken into account the motivational conflict present in the agent.

Alfred Mele (1983a) enquires 'whether people ever act akratically when their practical reasoning does not stop at a conditional judgement, but issue in an intention to do an *A* here and now' (p. 349). His argument is that an unconditional judgement is an intention to do an *a* here and now. But it is possible for an agent to form an intention to do an *a* here and now, yet fail to act according to it. He gives a counter example to show that akratic action against a here and now intention is possible. He illustrates his point by citing the following case:

John's present Biology 100 lab assignment is to determine what his blood type is by pricking one of his fingers with a needle and examining a sample of his blood under a microscope. Although John does not mind the sight of his own blood, he is averse to drawing blood from himself. John weighs his reasons in favour of carrying out the assignment against his contrary reasons and judges that, all things considered, he ought here and now to prick his finger with sufficient force to release the appropriate blood for the experiment. Moreover, he intends to prick his finger at once, and he moves the needle towards his finger with the intention of drawing blood. However, as he sees the needle come very close to his skin he stops. It is more difficult than he thought to carry through. He decides that if he did not look at the needle, it would be easier to complete the task. And he tries again, this time without looking. But when he feels the needle touch his finger, he stops (p. 349).

Mele provides two possible explanation for John's not pricking his finger: (i) John is psychologically unable to perform the task i.e. his desire not to harm himself grows stronger than his intention to prick his finger; (ii) because he is weak, he fails to do what he intends to do. He points out that the psychological impossibility thesis is not possible (see chap. IV of this thesis). Davidson's account may explain some cases of akratic action where the agent acts against his all-things-considered judgement. And the cause of his so acting may be due to weakness. Davidson also denies the cases where the agent lacks the ability to act as he intends or is prevented from doing so. But he does not take into account the case in which the akrates does not stop at all-things-considered judgement and forms an intention to do the action here and now.

In the above example the biology student judges that all-things-considered it is better to prick his finger than not to; he also forms an intention to prick his finger, yet intentionally fails to do it. Mele's contention is that this type of akratic action is possible. His explanation for this is that when John intentionally restrains from pricking his finger, his intention to prick his finger may be replaced by it. But John does not change his mind about what is best to do. John's intention to prick his finger is based on his evaluation of reason for and against pricking it. As Mele says, 'any rational weighing of wants is ranked in respect of value' (1987, p. 38). But taking cue from

watson he argues that in the case of akratic action against a here-and-now intention, there is not a proper combination of the agent's evaluative ranking and his motivational force to do that action. So he concludes that when an agent acts against his here-and-now judgement the contrary action may have a stronger motivational force to do the action.

Mele attempts to show that without rejecting a causal theory of action one can explain an agent's failing to act in accordance with a here-and-now intention or, in Davidson's words, with an 'unconditional judgement'. (According to the Causal theory of action "A is an intentional action only if A's agent had a reason for A-ing and (his having) that reason was a cause of his A-ing." Mele, 1987, p. 32). In fact Davidson's principles P 1, and P 2 together deny the possibility of an agent's acting against his unconditional judgement; or if there happens to be such an act then it is not akratic at all. Mele points out that there is a supposition, namely, 'the balance of an agents's motivations must always be in line with his here-and-now intention', which creates difficulty in explaining the kinds of actions mentioned above. One who holds a causal theory of action, however, is not necessarily committed to such a supposition. There are two possible situations in which the biology student in the example cited above, is more motivated to refrain from pricking his finger than to pricking it. In the first, we can assume the balance of John's motivation to be in line with his intention



when he forms the intention. In the second, they are out of line with one another. It is conceivable, in the first case, that his motivation shifts when he actually approaches the intended action. His desire not to harm himself might have grown stronger and stronger so that finally he refrains from pricking his finger. This explanation, which Mele qualifies as partial, need not contradict the central thesis of a causal theory of action. The agents desire not to harm himself and his belief that he would harm himself if he pricked his finger, together provide his reasons, required in a causal theory of action. There is also no difficulty in supposing that this reason of his causally contributes to his refraining from pricking his finger.

Mele then explains the second possibility by using Gary Watson's distinction between two senses of 'wants more'. In the evaluative sense, John, the biology student, might want to complete the assignment more than he wants to avoid harming himself by pricking his finger with a needle. But in the motivational sense he might want more to avoid harming himself. In this case, when John forms a here-and-now intention to prick his finger on the basis of a practical reasoning it involves a ranking in respect of value; at the same time it is not, or not the same as a weighing in respect of motivational force. As Mele says, the motivating force of his two competing wants, at the time of his forming the intention "was not in alignment with his ranking of them" (1987, p. 39). An unpleasant childhood

experience in the agent might have played a role in bringing this motivational imbalance in him: Such an explanation, it should be noted again, is not inconsistent with the central thesis of the causal theory of action. John has a reason for not pricking his finger and his having that reason is a cause of his refraining. But, what is more important to notice, however, is the fact that for an adequate explanation of the intentional action in the above case, it is not sufficient just to state the reasons for which it is done. This discussion reveals that the model of practical reasoning lacks the explanatory power to account for an agent's action against his unconditional judgement. Mele agrees that practical reasoning has a motivational force; but, if our aim is an account of akrasia in terms of just practical reasoning something more seems to be involved in producing the akratic action. For Mele, self-control is the factor that determines whether an agent is most motivated to do the action towards which he forms an intention.

## NOTES

1. Davidson says that:  
However, I did not want to explain incontinence as like making a logical mistake. But the principle of continence is not a principle of logic. As Hempel (1965) says of tinenence was modelled: 'The requirement of total evidence is not a postulate nor a theorem of inductive logic; it is not concerned with the formal validity of inductive arguments. Rather, as Carnap has steessed, it is a maxim for the application of inductive logic; we might say it states a necessary condition of rationality of any such application in a given "knowledge situation".' A failure to reason in accord with such a 'maxim' is possible even for someone who knows the maxim; even for someone who realizes that the maxim ought to be applied to the case in hand. Of course there is a strong sense in which 'knowing the maxim' could be taken to require uniformly applying it. Such a person would be inductively rational. Similarly, being continent is acting and intending in accord with the principle of continence. But one can know one ought to be continent and fail (1985a, p. 206).
2. Rapaport Elizabeth (1973) uses the notion of adequate and inadequate reason to provide rational explanation for incontinent action.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

(a) We have seen in the first chapter that Socrates' denial of the possibility of akrasia is based on his theory of knowledge. His view is (not just) that knowledge has a motivating force. In addition to this he holds that if someone has knowledge "nothing will force him to act otherwise than as knowledge directs, since wisdom is all the reinforcement he needs" (Protagoras, 352, b - d). It is this position that nothing would move a person to act contrary to his knowledge that is crucial in Socrates' view of akrasia. From this we can infer that wanting to do what knowledge forbids is an instance of incomplete knowledge. That is, when one has complete knowledge, no motivational force is left for any contrary action. The Socratic view that man can have knowledge of virtue in the same way as man has knowledge of reality is relevant here. The firm foundation of knowledge, which is provided by Reason, rather than senses, is what Socrates was searching for. For a rationalist like Socrates Reason itself tells one what is good or bad, right or wrong. Therefore, just as it is absurd to try to sharpen a pencil with a paper knife when one you knows that a paper knife cannot be used to sharpen a pencil, likewise, it is absurd to tell lies when one knows that telling lies is bad. The distinction drawn by modern analytical philosophers between what the world is like and our attitude to it, seems to have no significant place in the

conceptual scheme of Socrates. His reality is a totality in which such distinctions are blurred or have no meaning. To know is to act in the world, virtuously. A man of knowledge is a transformed individual to the extent that knowledge makes him an agent of right action. It is in this sense that one should understand Socrates' dictum 'knowledge is virtue'. It is about such an agent that one would say, 'If that agent has knowledge he will not commit any act contrary to that knowledge'. But in common life one does come across men acting against what their knowledge directs. In such cases they lack complete knowledge, or it is not an instance of acting on knowledge at all. This is how we have to explain Socrates' denial of akrasia. The agent's own admission of acting against his better judgement does not show that his value judgement is governed by knowledge.

For Socrates, moral principles are instances of knowledge. When they guide our actions we are actually guided by knowledge. If an agent acts against his better judgement then the moral beliefs that form the ground of his judgement are empty. That is, these beliefs are not realised by his whole self. Or he does not know himself fully. In both cases he acts on mere opinion or belief. An agent's judgement that it is better not to have sex with the prostitute at time  $t$  than to have it at  $t$ , might be guided by his moral belief that it is bad to have sex with a prostitute at any time. This belief might be supported by or linked to other moral beliefs. Socrates' condition on these

beliefs/principles is that they should be clear, certain and not subject to change if they are to attain the status of knowledge. Socrates also holds that only through Reason can one arrive at such knowledge. This knowledge is definite and has no rival. If an agent does not possess such knowledge and still holds moral belief that resembles this knowledge in its content, then how can he be said to have acted on knowledge even when he acted on that moral belief?

Socrates' theory of motivation is now clear: only when the knowledge acquired through the work of reason is present in man, is he motivated to do an action. The underlying assumption is that man is a purely rational being. In other words, only in the case that man's being is defined in terms of pure reason that Socrates' dictum 'knowledge is virtue' makes sense. And akrasia is ruled out for the reason that knowledge is not present in the agent when he commits a wrong act even when he did it against his best judgement and moral beliefs. One can call an assumption of rationality of this sort the assumption of pure rationality. However, as we have noticed in the first chapter, Plato represents Socrates (in the Republic) as advocating a different view. There, reason is only one of the three parts of the soul, others being spirit and appetite. The picture Plato draws in the Republic is that of reason, sometimes, losing its hold on appetite when one knowingly commits wrong doing. This is not in tune with the assumption of pure rationality according to which,

except in ignorance, men always act as reason dictates. (We shall return to this issue.)

The difficulty with the pure rationality thesis is that it does not consider it important to ask why people fail to act according to what they believe to be the better course of action or do what they believe to be wrong, regardless of whether they really know it or not. The question of knowledge and ignorance does not have a crucial significance here. 'Knowingly doing wrong' does not mean, in this case, doing wrong when the agent possesses the knowledge of reality. The question remains even when what one takes to be truth is really falsehood. What is sufficient for his 'knowingly doing wrong' is an awareness, a belief that the action is wrong at the time of committing it. The question now is: How can one perform an action which he believes to be wrong? If we interpret 'doing wrong with knowledge' in this way, we have a modest rationality thesis which to concentrate on common experience in which there are numerous examples of men doing wrong knowingly. This is what Aristotle does when he admits that there are akratic actions. In fact Aristotle's conception of knowledge more or less conforms to a modest rationality thesis, in the sense that his knowledge of universals is not a knowledge of transcendental forms in the Platonic sense, which only pure Reason can comprehend. For Aristotle, a universal does not exist without a particular substance. However, the point relevant for our discussion is

that Aristotle's appeal to commonsense in the identification of akrasia is not surprising given his assumption of modest human rationality.

An assumption of human rationality similar to the one we find in Socrates but devoid of Socratic metaphysical underpinnings is to be found in the moral philosophy of Hare. Hare claims that if we sincerely assent to a command implied in a moral judgement, we cannot act contrary to it, provided it is in our psychological power to do so. What makes Hare's position more impressive than Socrates' is that for him this follows from the logical relation between an assent to a command and an action. Regarding this point Hare says that there is something angelic about the logic of moral language. Now, where is the strong assumption of rationality in Hare? It is the assumption that every sincere acceptance of a moral maxim, which is universalizable and prescriptive, requires of the agent, by the sheer logic of it, to do an action in accordance with it. To put it more precisely, it is not the logic of moral discourse as such but the assent to the moral judgement got through it that places the agent in an inescapable situation, such that his not doing the action he assented to is an impossibility. If the agent performs an action contrary to his better judgement in the above sense, then his assent to it must be half-hearted, at the least. The difficulty with Hare's model, however, is that in his scheme acting on a moral judgement we have assented to is not a



condition we have placed on our action. Rather it is a natural outcome of the relation between what we are and the moral discourse we are engaged in. A strong assumption of rationality underlies such a model.

By contrasting Hare's model with that of Davidson we can cast more light on this issue. Davidson seems to realise the difficulty with the strong assumption of rationality which has the formal structure of a deductive argument. If an agent believes that reason supports a course of action, then, normally, he sets out to do that action. But a statement containing the description of such an action does not necessarily follow from a statement containing the belief about its worthiness. For this relation is established by way of a normative principle: one ought to do what one adjudges to be the best action. When Davidson points to a second-order principle of this sort he is showing why one cannot uphold the rationality thesis in the strong sense. Men do not always act in a strictly rational manner. Rationality itself is a norm we try to conform to, often with great difficulty. Now the solution to the problem is not very far to find: *akrasia* is possible when an agent does not go by the principle of continence.

(b) One may wonder, with respect to the problem of *akrasia*, how significant is the shift in the focus from moral weakness to general cases of irrational action. If it becomes clear that there is nothing characteristically moral about *akrasia*, then

confining the discussion of the problem of akrasia to the language of morals becomes a methodological limitation. A typical example of moral weakness will occur either when an agent does something wrong intentionally and freely, knowing well that it is morally wrong, or when he fails to act on what he judges to be a morally right action (e.g. the typical case of the agent who finally visits a brothel for sexual gratification despite his moral belief that prostitution is bad, one should not practice it nor should one be part of its practice etc.) Consider a case into which morality does not necessarily enter but which is nevertheless a case of weakness of will: someone knows that he is a heart patient and is thoroughly convinced that his intake of even a little amount of fat will be a risk considering his weak heart, nevertheless succumbs to the temptation of eating fatty food. When someone acts in this way we can describe his action as irrational because what is expected of a rational agent when he judged A to be better than B is that he actually does A and not B. The agent himself might be possessing such an assumption of rationality, in which case he himself recognizes his action as contradictory. Unless one makes self-control or continence itself a virtue, the second case cannot be treated as involving moral weakness. In the first case one can impute moral weakness to the agent because he fails to abide by his own moral judgement. Now one aspect both the cases share in common is the lack of control in performing what the agent considers to be the best course of action, and it is this point that is vital in

describing akrasia. Moral weakness, thus, is an instance of a more general case of weakness of will.

But what do we gain by removing morality from the picture? Consider again the first case. When the agent's action (visiting the prostitute) fails to accord with his moral belief (prostitution is bad and should be avoided), the point that naturally come to focus is surely his moral failure. This is clearly a case of moral weakness and the moral aspect is the distinguishing feature of this action. It is legitimate to ask, 'How can one act against his moral belief or fail to act according to it?' Furthermore akrasia sharers with other sort of some general features of action as such. For instance, just as a heart patient does not have any reason against his decision of not eating fatty food, so also the akratic agent has no acknowledged reason either to act against his moral belief or not to act in accordance with it. It is this general feature which makes his action an instance of moral weakness. But suppose he has an acknowledged reason for not acting according to his judgement that he ought not visit the prostitute. Then we cannot describe his action as an instance of moral weakness. For in such a case he simply does not take his moral belief seriously. For instance, his acknowledged reason might be that his need for sex has a priority over his belief that prostitution is bad.

Thus it is because the agent has no reason for rejecting his better judgement that that is right to characterise his action

as a result of moral weakness. And if by alluding to the general feature of action we can satisfactorily explain the problematic nature of akratic action, then it is desirable to shift the focus of attention from a distinguishing aspect to the general one.

(c) Socrates believed that reference to the state of mind of a person who is allegedly committing an akratic action will consist in no more than describing that agent's ignorance. An akratic agent admits of his wrong doing but explains it in terms of his being overcome by pleasure. This is the admission that pleasure has a mastery over him, that his action is governed by pleasure. Against this Socrates maintains that when someone commits a wrong action under the influence of longing for pleasure, then his calculation of pleasure and pain is inadequate. It is part of one's knowledge of virtue to be equipped with the power to exercise his choice between lesser and greater good. One succumbs to the demands of pleasure only when he lacks this knowledge. That is, one does a wrong thing out of ignorance. As we have noticed in the first chapter, for Plato, Reason can fail to control the appetite whereby one commits a wrong action while knowing that it is wrong. The picture presented in the Republic is that of a conflict of inner forces, namely between Reason and appetite. Aristotle on the other hand, in his first three of the four solutions, makes use of a distinction he himself has drawn between acting 'in-ignorance' and 'out of ignorance'. An akrates acts 'in-ignorance', i.e. either he is not exercising his

knowledge, or acts incogniscent of the minor premiss of the practical syllogism, or acts in a certain state of mind in which he possesses knowledge in a scanty way. Reference to the psychological state of mind of the agent is very evident in Aristotle's fourth solution. In that solution Aristotle argues that the presence of strong desire in the agent prevents his knowledge from being productive. On the side of his strong desire there is indeed a practical syllogism which governs his action. But he is also aware of another syllogism which forbids his action in that direction. The forbidding part of the syllogism, the conclusion, becomes inoperative for the agent because he is overtaken by the strong influence of desire.

Hare's twin theses, those of the 'ought being off-coloured' and 'the psychological impossibility' in one way or another jointly point to the psychological state of the agent who does not act according to his better judgement. These two theses are, in fact, given as a reason for ruling out cases of *akrasia*. The ought is off coloured when the agent weakens the prescriptive force of the universal principle, in order to accommodate his contrary action, i.e., the agent does not sincerely prescribe that principle to himself. The psychological impossibility thesis serves as a corollary to the earlier one in the sense that it points to the agent's lack of power to act according to his better judgement. The 'ought' thus loses its prescriptive force.

Davidson rejects the Hare-type explanation given in terms of

a conflict between reason and desire, 'desire powering Reason' or in terms of the model. In his philosophical account of the weakness of will he hardly needs to refer to the psychological state of the agent. Rather the account shows how the akratic action can be described as irrational without supposing that the action involves any logical contradiction. But in order to provide an explanation of the irrationality of akratic action one must appeal to psychological facts. It is obvious that Davidson himself had felt the need of giving an account of irrationality in some philosophically relevant psychological terms. His adoption of a modest theory of divided mind cleverly extracted from the Freudian theory of psychoanalysis bears testimony to this claim. The point to be noted here is that his method was to distinguish the conceptual questions from the empirical ones. His making an appeal to the divided mind thesis in order to throw light on the irrationality of akratic behaviour should be viewed as a an inadequacy in the purely philosophical explanation. The riddle of such a state of mind is left unsolved even after all conceptual clarifications are obtained. And to point to the psychological state of the akrates, as far as Davidson is concerned, involves a lot more psychology than expected in a philosophical account.

(d) It is on this point, again, that all philosophers are found to agree with each other. What account a philosopher gives of incontinent action, depends, to a large extent, on what theories

instance of ignorance.

To see more clearly that such a view has the consequence mentioned above, one needs only to compare it with a different view. As we have seen in the Republic, Plato's Socrates has given a different description of the human mind, a description that comes closer to the psychodynamics of Freud. The tripartite soul consisting of reason, spirit and appetite has desires moving in different, opposite directions. Each part has its own desires and governing principles. Plato accredits to each part independent motivation. But ideally speaking, Reason is meant to guide the other two parts. Reason might fail to guide the appetitive part, if the latter is stronger in motivation. In such cases it is possible that men do what they judge to be wrong. Though it is reasonable to say that a psychology of this sort allows the possibility of akrasia, one should leave room for doubt as to how far one can extract such a consequence from Plato's account of the soul. Given his view that Reason has its own desires which motivates the agent to acquire knowledge and that it guides the appetitive part, it is plausible to think that an agent in whom knowledge is fully developed will be able to control the appetite properly.

It is in Aristotle that we find the emergence of a different view of the mind. Aristotle rejects the pure rationality thesis. When one comes to possess knowledge, he will not, merely by dint of it, become virtuous. Appetite has its own reasons to move the

agent, just as the rational principle has its own reason. If the agent has chosen to act rightly according to the rational principle, he has reason for doing so. Likewise, he has a reason for acting on the strength of his appetite. What is crucial here is that the human mind can accomodate such opposite elements. Making right resolutions or arriving at the right conclusion in reasoning is not by itself sufficient to act continently. The power to resist the appetite is what makes the difference. As he said, the intellect by itself moves nothing. What an incontinent man lacks otherwise is the power to act according to his right judgement when he actually acts contrary to that judgement. It is in the absence of such power that the passion rules the roost over the agent's intellect. So, the mind, for Aristotle, consists of the intellect, which is neutral with regard to action and passions which have a direct motivational force.

Hare's thesis of 'psychological impossibility' appeals to the nature of the human mind in a somewhat similar way with the only difference that sometimes, the instance of not acting on one's better judgement is a matter of necessity. That is, the agent's failure to act on his ought-judgement is a matter of psychological necessity in the sense that his failure is necessitated by his being in the helpless state of psychological incapability. But since the ought-judgement is itself a matter of logical necessity, his failure to act accordingly implies that he involves himself in a sort of logically contradictory



situation. This is then explained as a case of failure due to psychological necessity. For Hare, this also serves as a causal explanation. The ought-judgement is a misfit in so far as the psychological ability of the agent is concerned. Unlike Aristotle, or Plato, Hare is silent about the details of this point. Aristotle would say that it is the overpowering passion that causes the akratic action. This, in a way, amounts to saying that the agent at times lacks the power to live up to the rational principles he sets out for himself. Hare is not saying something different. But he would add that such a lack of power is a permanent feature of that agent's mind. How are we to account for this occasional outburst of passion and of what does the psychological impossibility consist? These questions remain unanswered both in Aristotle and Hare. These are in fact questions of a broadly psychological nature, questions of philosophical psychology.

Indeed, Davidson has recognized the importance of this psychological dimension of the problem. His essay "Paradoxes of Irrationality" is a cautious attempt to adopt a model of the human mind in order to cast light on this irrational phenomenon. He believes that a modest Freudian theory provides such a model. His account of the semi-autonomous structures of the mind is, of course, very unlike the one we come across in the Republic. In the Republic model, Reason subordinates the other two parts, of which the appetitive part rebels against Reason's domination.

But in Davidson's account each part has its own reasons. Unlike the other views on the mind we have discussed so far, the notion of motivational strength is not essential for his model. The irrational behaviour, of which akrasia is one, can be well explained without resorting to such a notion. We have already given his account of irrationality in terms of the partitioned mind thesis. However, one might wonder whether one needs to buy a mental model of the sort Davidson has provided us, in order to explain the irrationality involved in akrasia.

(e) Consider Davidson's second-order principle, or what he called 'the principle of continence': one ought to do what one judges to be the best. Unless the agent has internalised such a principle it does not make sense to characterize the agent's action against his own best judgement as irrational. Thus, for Davidson it is very crucial that the agent himself has such a principle, if we are to characterise his action as irrational. But this position seems to be counter-intuitive. For, then, there could be cases of akrasia which are not irrational! That is, if there are cases in which the agent does not hold the second-order principle, and still acts against his better judgement, then those cases are not typically irrational. Take for example the case of the heart patient who, against his better judgement, takes fatty food. He does not have a principle of continence that he ought to do what he thinks to be the best. But he has as part of his reasons for his better judgment the

following: it is of foremost importance as far as his wellbeing is concerned not to take fat. Still after seeing the fried beef on the dining table he does not resist his temptation. If Davidson brings in the notion of the second-order principle as an explanatory device, then in the light of the counter-examples it appears to be nonexplanatory. The case in question demands explanation as to how the agent can do something which he regards extremely important to avoid. The irrationality of the action, therefore, comes from the agent's failure to act on his rational choice and not from his failing to abide by the second-order principle he himself internalises. One could say, with all reservations, that a rational choice is determined by self-interest. What needs explanation is why the agent fails to do what he believes, everything considered, to be better for him to do.

Is this case characteristically different from a case of moral weakness? If it is an agent's not acting on his rational choice, or acting against it that makes an action irrational, then many typical cases of moral weakness are not cases of irrational action. Consider again the case of the person who visits the prostitute against his better judgement. First of all, one can conceive this case as not involving a second-order principle held by the agent. He need not hold such a principle in order to act akratically. He need only act contrary to his 'ought' judgement. Hare might be basically correct in holding

that a prescriptive force is inbuilt in the 'ought' judgement. In our example the agent's reason for judging that it is better to avoid sex with the prostitute than to have it is the moral belief that prostitution is bad. By Hare's logic, this turns out to be a prescription unto himself and all others. The very acceptance of a moral principle implies that the agent has set his mind positively disposed to act accordingly, as and when the occasion arises. If such is the consequence of accepting a moral maxim then, it is redundant to have a principle of continence tagged to it. And akrasia occurs automatically when one fails to act in the way he prescribed to himself.

Now, is this a case of irrational behaviour? To test whether it is or it is not, one should ask whether the agent has acted against his rational choice. In other words: Is acting on a moral principle the same as acting on a rational choice? It should be evident that the answer depends on what we count as rationality. The question, now, is whether the agent considers that the moral principle in question serves his self-interest best or not. Even if the agent sincerely assents to the moral principle at a conscious level, at a deeper level of his considerations there must be a belief that it actually does not always serve his selfinterest. If the agent acts, thus, against his moral principle, then he acts in a way which serves his self-interest in a better way. His rationality won, his morality lost! But all the same, he is morally weak. He feels guilty

about his action.

We have a point in distinguishing these two contrasting types of akratic behaviour. The question is: Can we have a common explanation for both types of akrasia? It is nearly impossible to have an explanation unless we have a theory of motivation. Though it is not our aim to provide such a theory in this thesis, we have argued that some theory of motivation is required. In a simple formulation of the question one should ask why the agent eats fatty food when he wants to avoid it, in the case of the heart patient, and why the agent has sex with the prostitute when he wants to avoid it in the second case'. In both cases, the answer is that the agents lack sufficient motivation to act on their principles. In the first case what motivates the agent is the need to satisfy his habitual craving for fatty food. His rational choice is very weak in moving him to action. This choice might have been formed after the habit of taking to fatty food had fully developed. So the motivational strength is on the side of habit. In the second case the motivational strength is on the side of his need to have sex, rather than on the side of his belief that prostitution is bad. In his order of preferences his need for sex stands higher than a moral belief that forbids sex with a prostitute. The preference is again determined by his self-interest. What self-interest is served by sticking to the moral belief in question and what one gains by doing the forbidden act are questions of crucial

importance. If what he gains is the social reward in the form of respect or praise which will serve his self-interest very little compared to the satisfaction of his sexual desire, then his motivation will shift from the former to the latter. The same example can be twisted to fit the description of an irrational behaviour if the agent in the case is fully convinced that having sex with the prostitute will amount to contacting AIDS. Here again one has to think twice before calling the agent's action irrational. One should ask: Does the agent actually believe that he should be better off without sex than contacting a deadly disease? However, the crucial question will then be: Which of his wants has stronger motivation?

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